

MONSOON NOTEBOOK:
Exploring Home

by
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the meaning of home, and the role it plays in my relationship to architecture. It rests in the transitional space between my native Sri Lanka and Canada, where I have lived for the last eighteen years. When I began my Master of Architecture, I attempted to connect with my original home, but there was no amount of academic research or technical expertise that could answer my questions. And so, without a clear objective, I followed an inward calling, that I needed to return to my place of birth.

This thesis records my rite of passage into architecture by undertaking a journey home, a less traditional interpretation of the Grand Tour. I set off to find meaning at the source, to the place where home and architecture meet, always searching through the lenses of everyday life. I began my trip in Colombo, and soon found myself in a deeply engaging yet rather unplanned series of experiences that helped define my relationship with my homeland. It was only by fully immersing myself within the place that I was able to discover its poetry; the sound, smell and feel of the rain awakened my senses, entering me and guiding me forward in my journey to finding meaning in architecture.

This is my monsoon notebook. It records, presents and re-presents my travels as a means of architectural grounding and self-discovery. My photographs, journal entries and childhood recollections depict a place of architectural learning that is now part of me, in my body and my senses.

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For making the place of home,
a place in my heart.

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All photographs are taken by the author, with the exception of figures 9, 158, 160, 163, 165, 166, 167, 169, which were photographed by my cousin Rivindu De Silva.

All drawings are credited according to the original source referenced.

Introduction

To know where one belongs, and to know oneself is often a good beginning.
—Anjalendran, Sri Lankan architect.

I was born in Negombo, Sri Lanka and spent my first seven years there before uprooting with my family to begin a new life in Canada. After immigrating, my family moved frequently, and our sense of home was constantly disrupted. Most of my extended family, including my grandparents, still reside in Sri Lanka, and continue to be the bridge to my homeland that I knew so briefly. Even after so many years, I still feel an intimate connection to my native country—an acute yet intangible pull that beckons me to rediscover what I have left behind.

My growing interest for Sri Lanka did not emerge out of a conscious desire to reconnect with my heritage. It originally arose from a childhood memory of attending an elementary school in Negombo. These memories were not grim, but I was never able to escape the feeling that my school environment was inadequate. This feeling travelled deep within me and it persisted throughout my education. When I began my Master of Architecture, these memories triggered a much deeper yearning to know my native Sri Lanka. Although my original intent was to explore the implications of my childhood school on my education as an architect, the emerging interest in my birthplace awoke in me an irrepressible longing to return to the place where I was born. With only my initial studies on schools and a handful of childhood memories, I decided my architectural education required me to fly 14,000 kilometers from Toronto, Canada to Colombo, Sri Lanka. I booked my flight, departing on November 15th, 2014, and returning February 14th, 2015. When I left, I took my laptop, sketchbook, camera, voice recorder, and a few items of clothing. The rest of my two large suitcases were filled with gifts for my family.

In writing the thesis, I hope to reconstruct Sri Lanka as I know it, drawing from my trip as well as from my earliest recollections. This document is a gesture of gratitude to the land and its people, who have enriched my journey and made it both pleasurable and memorable. It is my attempt at unlocking the underlying connection between myself and my birthplace and what this means to my education in architecture.

Monsoon Notebook

Sitting
Reaching
Climbing
Trekking

Bawa Trail

Reflecting
Painting
Seeing
Beginning

In 1754, Horace Walpole coined the term 'serendipity' in reference to the heroes of his tale *The Three Princes of Serendib*, who had the unique faculty of discovering things by accident, and of finding things without seeking them.

Serendib is actually the Arabic name of Sri Lanka. As the island is now called, a name which in Sinhalese and Tamil conveys the idea of resplendence or natural richness. Sailors, because of the favourable winds which warm the island; merchants, because of its prices and gems; and artists from Walpole to Neruda, because of its 'natural and poetic charm'—all have felt the sense of bliss and blessedness which the island seemed to offer, and all have felt the sense of tranquillity and equanimity which none sought but all seemed to find.¹

"A Place Called Serendib"—Darren C. Zook.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Notebook I

Sitting

November 15, 2014

*It's great to have roots, as long as you can take them with you.
—Gertrude Stein*

I was uncertain of whether I had made the right decisions as I boarded the plane and prepared for my long flight. Resigning myself to the uneasy self-assurance that comes with many years of preparation, I attempted to give my thoughts and eyes some respite and settled into a restless sleep.

As the plane descended into the thick morning fog, all sense of the ground vanished, as if we had overshot the tiny island completely and were headed for the dark ocean. The plane shook violently before the wheels abruptly made contact with the runway. As the plane rolled to a stop, I took a deep breath of relief, exhaling months of built up anxiety. I couldn't identify the exact feeling that had developed inside of me as I planned my trip to Sri Lanka. I wondered whether it was a question of belonging that I struggled with, a fear that the place I once knew would no longer be the same one from my memories. I peered through the porthole of the plane, wondering if I would still recognize this place, and whether it would still recognize me.

Before leaving, I had attempted to sort out what I would do in Sri Lanka. Most of my conversations revolved around this question, to which I did not find an answer. Perhaps, because of this uncertainty, I sensed an eagerness growing inside of me, a feeling that left me incredibly motivated to face whatever it was that awaited me on the island.

And for the next month it rained...

*Figure 3 (following page): The view
from my aunt's front veranda, Negombo.*



November 16, 2014

There is no other experience like being in the middle of tropical rainfall. I had experienced blizzards and hail storms before, but none could compare to the torrential deluge that I witnessed in Sri Lanka. Tropical storms unfolded quickly like an invading army, fiery of temperament and completely unpredictable. The rain fell dark and furious, like a volley of arrows blotting out the sun above an ancient battlefield, drowning the landscape in a cacophony of drumbeats.

Everything had grown lush, green and unmanageably wild due to the heavy downpour. The only way to dry clothes during the monsoon rain would be to hang them on a clothesline in between the columns on the front veranda. If this were not sufficient, they were placed under the ceiling fan indoors.

Everyone retreated to their homes. Birds and butterflies were nowhere to be seen. Even the unruly crow had disappeared out of sight and into the cavernous tree canopies. Doors and windows remained open and nowhere, not even in the deepest sanctuaries of our homes, were we able to escape the roar of the rain.

In these moments, the rain was as much a part of our lives as the beads of sweat on our weary bodies that continued to drip even in the temporary absence of the sun. One thing became predominantly clear from within the warmth of our homes: when it began to rain, everything stopped.

I stared at the rain as it crashed against everything in sight, my ears deafened by the inescapable noise. While I sat alone on the front veranda, memories of past showers flooded my mind as quickly as water filled the yard. As the drumming of raindrops gained tempo, I couldn't help but bathe in these memories for the moment.

Rainy Days

The whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. —Virginia Woolf

A single recollection of a rainy day was compiled of many days of rainfall that overlap and amalgamate. The only constant in these recollections is my home, the yard that it rested on, and my vivid imagination. I see my younger self standing impatiently on the edge of the back porch, clutching a pair of large plastic buckets, waiting for the rain to stop. The rain is so close that its mist lightly tickles my skin, and its pulsing beats resonate through my arms and hands.

Once the rain subsided, the yard was submerged in two feet of water, often overflowing the front steps of the veranda. The sound of rain gave way to the uproar of hundreds of frogs and other creatures alike that emerged from their hidden crevices within the yard. My sister and I left the shelter of our home, submerging ourselves knee-deep in water. Step-by-step, we scavenged the yard, imitating the cranes that had already arrived in number. We paused once we reached a suitable location, allowing the sediment stirred up by our feet to settle in the murky water and reveal glimpses of life.

Eventually, our buckets were filled with crabs, crawling around frantically. I attempted to uncover the mystery of their sudden appearance in the yard. Had they crawled up from under the ground? Did the rain flood their network of tunnels, forcing them to reach for the surface?

My parents found us soaked from head to toe and demanded we return the creatures back to their natural habitat. "The yard is as much theirs as it is ours," my mother had said, when we returned to the warmth and safety of the house. Outside, the murky rainwater gradually disappeared into the earth or into channels that led to the Hamilton Canal, leaving no trace of its transient creatures.

Any time it rains, I am taken back to the memory where two feet of water submerged my knees. I feel the mist on my cheeks, and the hesitation before taking another step into the murky, uncharted water. The thrill of snatching crabs with my bare hands rushes through my body just the same as in the rains of my childhood, more than a decade ago.



Figure 4: The view out of my bedroom window, Negombo. 6:45 a.m.

November 17, 2014

I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses.
—Michael Ondaatje

If I didn't wake up to the sound of our neighbour's rooster, or the chatter of birds, the sound of my aunt sweeping leaves off the moist morning earth would always gradually rouse me. The morning mist felt surreal, like a dream-scape slowly fading and giving way to the waking world.

I beheld this scene from a room in the aunt's family's newly built house. A short distance away was my childhood home, which my grandparents had moved to some years after my family's departure.

Once I had wound up my mosquito net each morning and sat up in bed, I would gaze out the window at the back of that old house. Its presence instilled in me a sense of belonging to the place I had been away from for so long. Every inch of the walls were bursting with memories, escaping through its cracked surface. Some devoured me for minutes while others derailed my entire morning. The house was named Rohana, the male counterpart to my grandparent's oldest child: my mother, Rohini. And like my mother, what a warm and loving childhood that house gave me.

My desk overlooked the courtyard space where my grandparent's caretakers bustled throughout the day, hanging washed clothes and picking coconuts and herbs from the yard. Seeing them reminded me that the time I spend with my grandparents would be limited by my travels. I struggled with this thought, but even the glimpses of their caretakers going about their daily rituals gave me a sense of assuredness for their well-being—an impalpable closeness to my grandparents.

My ears had not yet adjusted to the concoction of sounds that persisted in the yard. As nightfall approached, the sounds entered the room and reverberated around me as if walls and windows did not exist. I had memorized the particular cry of the three geckos that found refuge in the window openings above my work table. They were like tireless sentries, eagerly devouring the mosquitoes that thirsted after my foreign blood when I sat down to write in my notebook.

On Home

Home is an embodiment of us and all that surrounds us. It is as much the physical space we reside in, as it is the nuances of the built and sensory world around it; the sounds that surround it and reverberate from every corner of the yard; the trees that extend their roots under it, slowly breaking and entering its brittle foundations; the reaching over of frail branches and leaves, shading it from the relentless sun; the breeze that trickles its way into the back doors and across the living room, taking with it dusty old newspapers that float gracefully through the openings in the front veranda. The relationships between home and the greater world fundamentally depend on the other for each to exist. The idea of home as a place of our own remains true only because there is a greater world just outside our doorstep. And conversely, the world wouldn't be foreign if we hadn't extended our roots in attachment to a specific place. It is relative to the wider world, that home is the place we know best. This dependency helps to define home as a reflection of everything that we are and simultaneously everything that frames us. The latter could include our yard, our town, our country, the vast ocean, or even the entire globe. It may also include the dried leaves that land on the white sand just outside our windows, precisely raked each morning into a herringbone pattern marking the arrival of a new day.

In his writings on the phenomenology of home, Juhani Pallasmaa expresses that the "reflection on the essence of home takes us away from the physical properties of a house into the psychic territory of the mind. It engages us with issues of identity and memory, consciousness and the unconscious, biology motivated behavioural remnants as well as culturally conditioned reactions and values."² Pallasmaa's ideology suggests that our connection with our childhood home is more closely tied with the immaterial rather than the physical. He reveals an attachment to the experience of home more than the intricacies of its built form. This is because we leave a part of our mind permanently housed in our childhood home.

The extents of our homes are delineated by whimsical allotments and boundaries but the spaces of home are filled with things of deep sentiment. The essence of home is distinguished by both our material possessions and our human relationships. The removal and placing of slippers, back-packs and our neatly wrapped school books are all ritual to the home, as are the times spent in conversation under the dim yellow light of the kitchen table. Our home celebrates the act of sleeping, dreaming, and waking, just as much as it commemorates the rampant dark clouds that sporadically clash in a frenzy, rattling the panes of glass held between old, wooden window frames. And with each raindrop the red clay roof tiles sing to a song that only our home remembers. The red pigment left on our bare feet from wandering on the cool, concrete floor is a mark of home, as is the feeling of white sand on the underside of our feet that we bring in from the yard, soon to be swept away.



Figure 5: The family property from the front gate, towards my childhood home.

Of Havens

*Though we dream of an airy intimacy,
Open and free, yet sheltering as a nest
For passing bird, or mouse, or ardent bee,
Of Love where life in all its forms can rest
As wind breaths in the leaves of a tree;
Though we dream of never having a wall against
All that must flow and pass cannot be caught,
An ever-welcoming self that is not fenced,
Yet we are tethered still to another thought:
The unsheltered cannot shelter, the exposed
Exposes others; the wide open door
Means nothing if it cannot be closed.*

*Those who create real heavens are not free,
Hold fast, maintain, are rooted, dig deep wells;
Whatever haven human love may be,
There is no freedom without sheltering walls.
And when we imagine wings that come and go
What we see is a house
And a wide-open window.*

—May Sarton

The Realm of Home

There is a sense of liberty associated with home that does not exist elsewhere. It is the domain in which we play the part of but a single note within an unceasing orchestra, among the ever-changing wilderness, where the tempo is the wind, and the percussion the rains. I felt the freedom to run aimlessly through the vigorous landscape; the soft ground that always caught my fall; the endless shrubbery that would devour any tennis ball that sped away too hastily from the crack of our cricket bats; and the evening light that made its way through the lethargic leaves of the coconut trees to gently caress the backs of our houses, igniting in its path invisible specks of dust that floated in the warm, humid air.

Gaston Bachelard, in his writings of home, establishes that the essence of our childhood home could never be fully understood and relived except in poetry and dream. He explains that “when we dream of the house we were born in, in the utmost depths of reverie, we participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the material paradise. This is the environment in which the protective beings live. We shall come back to the maternal features of the house. [...] Our daydreams carry us back to it. And the poet well knows that the house holds childhood motionless ‘in its arms.’”³³ Bachelard’s reference to home as an environment where protective beings live suggests the consideration of metaphysical characteristics, but also tangible qualities; the home not only as the guardian of our bodies, but the refuge for our minds and our soul. He illustrates that “the house shelters day dreaming. The house protects the dreamer. The house allows one to dream in peace [...] Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human beings first world.”³⁴

The sincerity of Bachelard’s words fills me with the essence of my own childhood home, heightening my senses to the things that resonate warmly within me. Perhaps, it is not only the material things within our homes which emanate this warmth, but the very idea of an enclosure. If reduced to its simplest form, our house satisfies a primal need for shelter against the elements. It is the combination of the two—our emotions and experiences, which add meaning to the place, and a shelter that appeases our primal needs—that makes home so profound.

Leaving Home

There is one memory that promptly transcends me to another time—one that began with an early morning, an ironed two-piece uniform and a perfectly folded handkerchief that was pinned directly onto my shirt. The air was light and the morning dew once again met with the sun's warm rays. In a rush to pack my books and water bottle, I heard the sound of my father's 50cc scooter against the sound of waking birds and distant morning prayers.

I hung tightly onto my father on the back of his scooter. The feeling of the cool air against my face as the world sped by in a blur was exhilarating. I felt a fearlessness and freedom that was only possible with my father. I felt a similar emotion when I saw the tightly strung flags along the walls of the Buddhist temple we passed, that hovered precariously over each gust of wind, or the elegant descent of the Bodhi tree's leaves, free-falling ever so slowly—as if never to land. It was a feeling that I will never forget.

The first thirty meters took us from our garage to the front gate. I jumped off, released the latch, and pulled open the screeching metal gate. Another twenty-five meters and we were sputtering over the Hamilton Canal bridge. It was poorly built, constantly repaired, and covered with markings left from the vehicles that pummelled their way across. The bridge was only large enough for one vehicle at a time and instigated a race to the top, which involved long and tense face-offs that only ended when one of the drivers abandoned their ego.

Canal road, the narrow and rugged street covered in holes, was home to all sorts: people leaving for their daily excursions, rebellious rickshaw drivers, wandering stray dogs (often sleeping in the middle of the road), and even the occasional care-free cow. All had but one thing in common other than being in transit: no one considered the laws of the road or one another.

Any given combination of roads on our morning ride led to the same loud and chaotic entrance of the school yard. The large gate barely hung to its hinges as the sea of children in matching attire overflowed the street and marched into the dust, smoke, and forthcoming afternoon heat.



Figure 6 (top): A view from the Hamilton Canal bridge towards the property.

Figure 7 (bottom): The Hamilton Canal before sunset.

November 19, 2014

It was 3 p.m. and we were stopped smack-dab in the middle of after-school traffic. What would have been a fifteen minute rickshaw ride from the town center felt more like an hour. Children spilled out onto the road like water pouring through a broken hose, spreading sporadically in all directions.

My memories of attending school as a child are bound within the gates of the dry, dusty school yard. The ground swelled with heat and even the most minute movement dispersed clouds of dust. I remember running past concrete walls whose surfaces were cracking, through broken fences, over scattered tree branches and jumping over the piles of garbage that were scattered around the edges of the schoolyard. Dashing through the crowds of children while playing tag with my friends, I would come across the dreadful bathroom facilities. None of the students would intentionally go near this space, or even think to use it. In my hazy memory the bathrooms were located far from the classrooms, at the edge of the school property. It resembled the remnants of a ruin, without a delineated space or a function.

As I continued to trace memories of my childhood school, I recalled even the classroom spaces to be haphazardly assembled. Termites had chewed their way through the insides of our small wooden chairs. Tables wobbled on the hard concrete floors. Sewage ran along the outdoor spaces, adjacent to where children traversed from one classroom to another. The appalling odour of idle sewage made its way through the school yard under the scorching sun, wafting over the heads of children standing stiffly in groups reciting their morning prayers.

The Home We Carry

The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues, are as fugitive, alas as the years. —Marcel Proust

It appears that we do not part from the first world we know. Instead, the context relative to our first home changes and our relationship with it unfolds differently. Upon uprooting, we are left to experience our old home after a long flight across the world, or irregularly amidst dream. Although we may endlessly reminisce about our childhood home in photographs, recollections and daydreams, it seems highly unlikely to physically recapture or replace our oneiric home. We are connected to our childhood home the way a child is instinctively connected to its maternal mother. The yearning for our childhood home may also be closely tied with the unceasing affection and lament for our lost childhood. Although we could never have our childhood back, we can revisit our childhood home, to step backwards in time and experience once again the most vivid and pleasurable of our earliest memories.

Like most children, I spent a lot of my time in the my family compound and the school yard. I remember running quickly out the front veranda of my home along the roughly demarcated path towards the front gate of the property, where visitors entered. Although I now welcome guests in through the front door of my Canadian home, at the time they entered into the yard and I accompanied them on a walk back home that was most memorable.

I have always cherished my distant memories of home, but I am constantly reminded of how powerful they are in infiltrating my present-day experiences. Bachelard resounds that feeling, writing that in the slightest mention of home, one is transported “back to the old home, to the first home,” and in this transcendental moment “a sort of musical chord would sound in the soul of the reader.” But to fully understand the gravity of this sentiment, “one must have lost the house that stood for happiness. So there is also an alas in this song of tenderness.” He expresses that “It is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy.”⁵



Figure 8: A view of the dock at the Negombo lagoon fish market.

November 20, 2014

The sounds from the yard awoke me unspeakably early in the morning. I caught my uncle leaving on his morning excursions and tagged along, tightly hanging onto the back of his scooter.

At 7:30 a.m. we arrived amid the complete chaos of the Negombo fish market. My uncle weaved through the herds of people before resting his scooter alongside dozens of similar motorbikes. My uncle understood the fish market inside out. He started at one end and negotiated his way through the entire market before returning to close his first deal, having significantly lowered the cost of the morning catch along the way. I could barely follow his conversation with the series of fisherman and realized that my foreign presence alongside him only jeopardized his bargain. I decided to walk towards the water to take a few photographs, without realizing that I would not find my way back.

Once I realized that I had lost sight of him, it dawned on me that from a distance all of the men looked more or less the same. Voices projected in all directions forming a completely unintelligible language, as if I was listening to a recording of a debate that was sped up. Without a functioning cellphone (or anyone's phone number, for that matter) I stood completely still, stretching my vision in an attempt to look in all directions at once.

Although I was not able to distinguish him from the crowd, it turns out that I, on the other hand, was easier to spot. He found me in a matter of minutes, claiming that my "foreign" appearance and my "Westernized body movement" had given me away.

November 21, 2014

One evening, my uncle, who was otherwise very serious, walked out of the house with a grand smile. He was on his way to get a haircut. His barber owned a tiny salon, tucked into a row of small shops at the end of Canal road.

I ended up paying the barber a visit a week later, as my hair had grown thick and unbearable in the heat and humidity. After cutting each strand of hair to a precise length, he poured a few drops of an alcoholic substance into his hands and massaged it into my scalp. His hands were incredibly strong and he extended them down past my forehead and temples, circling them around my eyes.

At times I worried that my head would burst open, but I had surrendered completely to his strength, and sat powerless on the chair as he worked.

It was impossible to keep my eyes open. Just as I was brought to the brink of sleep by the massage, I was suddenly awakened by the sudden tap of the barber's fingers against my head. Afterwards, I struggled onto my feet and stumbled my way home in a daze.



Figure 9: In a hair salon near Canal Road, Negombo.

Home and Body

My exploration of home has led me to the fundamental connection it has to the human body, and the implications of such a connection. Our body is the vehicle through which we experience life, and our homes are the protector of our bodies—the portal through which we experience the world. In a passage about the house and the body, Juhani Pallasmaa writes that “we behold, touch, listen and measure the world with our entire bodily constitution and existence, and the experiential world is organized and articulated around the center of the body.”⁶ With age, our senses weaken and our experience of home changes; our bodies rely on the repetitive rituals that we have shared with our home over the years.

Pallasmaa believes that “our existential world has two simultaneous foci: our body and our home. There is a special dynamic relationship between the two; they can fuse and provide an ultimate sense of connectedness, or they may be distanced from each other, giving to a sense of longing, nostalgia and alienation.”⁷ The latter runs deeply in my relationship with Sri Lanka and my childhood home—a longing for the place that I parted from at a young age. The countless times my family and I have moved into a different house in our newly adopted country has only accentuated the acute feeling of alienation. This could be because “our domicile is the refuge and projection of our body, memory and self-identity.”⁸ In the process of relocating, we carry the sentiments of our beloved home with us. It may not easily adhere to a new place; thus, there is a discrepancy between body and home, leaving us unsettled. The relationship between the house and the body “is a two-way correspondence: The house is a metaphor of the body, and the body is a metaphor of the house.”⁹

In his book “Body, Memory and Architecture,” Author Kent Bloomer writes that “although we cannot see the inside of our body, we do develop memories of an inside world that include a panorama of experiences taken from the environment and etched into the ‘feelings’ of our identity over a lifetime of personal encounters with the world.”¹⁰ We participate in a more literal process than to Bloomer’s thoughts when we decorate our homes with found and collected items from our outwardly lives. These memorabilia transcend a practical use within the house—they represent our worldly participation. “We populate our inside world with the people, places, and events that we ‘felt’ at one time in the outside world, and we associate those events with the feelings themselves. Rituals over time leave their impression on the walls and forms of the interior and endow the rooms with artifacts which give us access to previous experiences.”¹¹ We place things inside of our homes where we can view them, hold them in our hands, and dream with their presence. In these moments, the items are fuel for our body to transport us to another place or time.

When I consider Pallasmaa’s ideology, it becomes apparent that our dislocation with our home brings discomfort, no different from the pain associated with physically dislocating a part of our body. It is a kind of separation that leaves us scattered—without a sense of grounding. A similar disengagement occurs within our own memories, of places we do not completely remember. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke remembers when his father had taken him to visit his childhood home: the ancient manor-house. Rilke writes in his notebook that after his visit he “never again saw that remarkable house,”¹² as it had fallen into a stranger’s hand after his grandfather passed away. He goes on to describe the scattered nature of his memories while revisiting the house:

As I find it in the memories of my childhood, it is no complete building: it is all broken up inside me; here a room, and here a piece of hallway that does not connect these two rooms but is preserved, as a fragment, by itself. In this way it is all dispersed within me—the rooms, the stairways that descended with such ceremonious deliberation, and now narrow, spiral stairs in the obscurity of which one moved as blood does in the veins.¹³

The spaces within Rilke’s recollection of the home are as fragmented as his memories, but their ability to live inside of him reminds me of the pieces of childhood memory that I carry with me, which will never leave my body. Rilke writes of his emerging memory vividly, inseparable from his body, describing that “it is as though the picture of this house had fallen into me from an infinite height and had shattered against my very ground.”¹⁴

In his notebook, Rilke goes on to uncover his childhood experiences in the house, piece by piece. His dismantling of memory displays the ingenious quality of memory to preserve our story. It is most intriguing that Rilke’s memory of home unravels relative to his own body; in this process he is the architect of his own memories. “The high and, I suspect, vaulted room was more powerful than everything else. With its darkening height and its never fully illuminated corners, it sucked all images out of you, without giving anything definite in return. You sat there as if you had disintegrated—totally without will, without consciousness, without pleasure, without defence. You were like an empty space.”¹⁵ He expands in detail his bodily experience as a result of the space, claiming that it made him feel nauseated and “brought on a kind of seasickness.”¹⁶ He only overcame this feeling of disconnection with a bodily response, by stretching out his leg until his foot touched his father’s knee. Perhaps, the giant scale of the space was overwhelming and impossible to relate to as a child. Touching his father’s leg was a way of relieving the fear and solitude that was brought about by the place—it was the only tangible connection he had.

November 22, 2014

It's a relief to hear the rain. It's the sound of billions of drops, all equal, all equally committed to falling, like a sudden outbreak of democracy. Water, when it hits the ground, instantly becomes a puddle or rivulet or flood.
—Alice Oswald

Rain clouds assembled quickly while I found shelter under the roof of a stage, where live jazz was performed on Thursday evenings. A few minutes later it began to pour, and the waiter ran through the courtyard with his hands over his head as if he wouldn't get wet. I ordered a papaya juice and a sandwich.

There was a calming sensation that came from the sound of rain landing on every possible surface, before making its way through to the cobble stone courtyard. As I flipped to a blank page in my sketchbook, I noticed that everything was muted by the rain, even the brightly coloured table clothes, beautifully tailored and sold at the Barefoot store. It was like seeing the world through a pair of sunglasses. When it rained, I felt cloaked by its all-encompassing weight. My eyes glanced outwards, but I couldn't help but search deeper inwards, overcome by nostalgia. I began to realize the limitations of memory to recover feelings, and that nostalgia is a consequence of memory, not memory itself—it is memory affected by our emotions.

The word “nostalgia” is deeply rooted between the realm of home and memory. It originates from a combination of the two Greek words *nóstos* (homecoming) and *álgos* (pain), describing a feeling of acute homesickness. Although romanticized in the present day, the word nostalgia was considered a potentially fatal disease that afflicted sailors at sea, convicts serving sentences, and slaves forced away from home.



Figure 10: The Barefoot Cafe courtyard, Colombo.

On Memory

I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions [...] I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace, and it is only a question of discovering how can we get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. —Virginia Woolf

When I look deeper into the archives of my own memories, there are some that repeat, like dreams we revisit numerous times. These memories are characterized by author Virginia Woolf as being “in existence independent of our minds.”¹⁷ They are stored deep in our unconscious or imprinted on the insides of our bodies, away from the mind’s eye. Through the course of our lives, these underlying memories can invade our present. Gaston Bachelard shares this sentiment, writing that, “The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed.” He adds that “it deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory.”¹⁸

Stephen J. Smith defines these transcendental moments in his exploration of physically remembering childhood, affirming that “it also seems possible to remember events from earliest childhood so graphically that one begins to question the psychological account of forgetfulness.”¹⁹ It seems that we always carry our memory with us, stored away like old photo albums, tucked into the backs of cupboards and cabinets. Memories fossilize within us and collect years of experience atop them, receding further into the depths of our minds, until we have completely forgotten their existence. Certain acts, rituals and processes give us access to these memories, and we are reminded again that they did in fact live within us, all that time.

Smith claims that his “discovery was simply that in writing about these early memory images, a vast store of remarkably detailed memories—in fact, an entire world of the most intense perceptions and feelings—began to unfold.”²⁰ Writing captures the nuances of the past, and gives it an opportunity to be ingrained in our minds. Through the act of writing, what is missing begins to take form. Memories in which the body is predominant are also physically remembered through the descriptions of certain writings, thus giving us an opportunity relive our lived experiences to the utmost.

Scientifically, my cognitive functions only recall childhood memories after the age of five, which leaves me with two years of retrievable memories of my birthplace. I always wondered whether the images of Sri Lanka that lived in my mind were accurate representations of my time there as a seven year old, or whether they were a figment of my imagination, compiled of years’ worth of photographs, stories and dreams. Richard Ellmann reiterates James Joyce’s words that “imagination is nothing but the working over of what is remembered,” and that more crucially, “imagination is memory.”²¹ Memory, as an accumulation of our past and present, is integral to the formation of our imagination, and is essential for us to see ourselves and the world we live in.

Body and Memory

The actual penetrates through the doorways of our body and reaches the brain where it is stored. Memories are within us, within our inner life; what else can this mean but in our brain. —Jan Hendrik van den Berg

It is difficult to understand our existential self without the careful consideration of our body, the means through which we engage our daily experiences. Author Sarah Robinson explores this relationship, finding that “recent neurological research has revealed, the mind is fundamentally embodied.”²² Although memory is an occupation of our minds, our most profound experiences are fundamentally linked to our bodily resonance to a place. My travels affirmed that being in the place was essential to recalling my memory accurately. It was the colour, smell, light and texture of the place I experienced that left a lasting impression on my memory.

French writer Jean Cocteau’s diary entries, after a visit to his own childhood home, shed light on the connection between body and memory. In 1953, he arrived at his old house in hopes of revisiting his own childhood memories, only to be rejected by the man who lived in the house. Disappointed, Cocteau left the site, trailing his finger along a wall near the house as he had in his childhood. As he performed this habit, he remembered that he was smaller at that time and decided to bend down and repeat the act. The result was remarkable, and his memories came flooding back. He writes that, “just as the needle picks up the memory from the record, I obtained the memory of the past with my hand. I found everything: my cape, the leather of my satchel, the names of my friends and of my teachers, certain expressions I had used, the sound of my grandfather’s voice, the smell of his beard, the smell of my sister’s dresses, and of my mother’s gown.”²³ The memory that was stored in his body was released when he retraced this original gesture, allowing him to remain in touch with his distant past. Cocteau’s experience reveals that the human body is a “physical continuity between past and present.”²⁴ By physically engaging with the original place of my memories, I am brought closer to the felt experience of the past. It required me to stand on the veranda of my childhood home in order to completely recall those memories; I needed to taste and smell the air after it rained and hear the frogs groan in the hundreds for my mind to call up the heaviest rainfalls of my distant childhood.

Memory is comprised of both the engravings of life on our mind and our body. A memory could be relived in one’s head, but the experience of a memory that is felt within the body is unmatched. The body, where the past is experienced without distance, takes on equal responsibility as the mind, in being the vehicle through which memory is manifested. We draw upon “the body as a memorial container—as itself a ‘place’ of memories [which] furnishes an unmediated access to the remembered past.”²⁵ It appears that we do not need to recall the past ourselves. Perhaps, our body unconsciously participates in this process with the outer world, “and it is as a body that one inhabits the past and it inhabits one’s body.”²⁶



Figure 11: A frog resting on the planter's chair one afternoon.

November 24, 2014

I spent every moment of my free time on the front veranda with my grandparents. The silence between us was filled with the sounds from the yard. In these moments, I began to appreciate blissful afternoons in the tropics. I felt an irrepressible desire to be still, to take a nap. It was precisely the feeling that overcomes us after consuming a satisfying meal. And although it was never expressed in words, I knew that my grandparents shared this sentiment.

When I was young, my grandfather would regularly sit on his *hansi putuwa* with a cup of tea. The chair was built in a reclined position, curving to support his tired body. Two foldable arms extended out to carry his legs. He had accomplished a lot in the brief morning and a moment on the chair was his reward, the gateway to reverie.

I gently closed my eyes, my body firmly planted on the strands of *ratan*, waved tightly between the chair's *jak* wood frame. I heard the sound of my grandparents' caretakers bustling through the home behind me, and tried my best to bring their voices into focus against the sound of birds and distant vehicles while I drifted in and out of sleep.

On Houses

*Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast.
It shall not be a glistening film that covers a wound,
but an eyelid that guards the eye.*

*You shall not fold your wings that you may pass through doors,
nor bend your heads that they strike not against a ceiling,
nor fear to breathe lest walls should crack and fall down.*

*You shall not dwell in tombs made by the dead for the living.
And though of magnificence and splendour,
your house shall not hold your secret nor shelter your longing.*

*For that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion of the sky,
whose door is the morning mist,
and whose windows are the songs and the silences of night.*

—Kahlil Gibran



*Figure 12 (top): The yard from my
aunt's front veranda, before sunset.*

*Figure 13 (bottom): The back of my
childhood home. 5:30 p.m.*

Locating Ourselves

In some aboriginal cultures, there is a shared belief “that the future is behind us and we are really moving towards the past.”²⁷ In an interview that formed an article titled “Dreaming the Beginning,” Robert Lawlor states that, “The past was a great epic that occurred, a great metaphysical dream-time that is completed, and yet its residues are there vibrating in the earth as a memory. The present is only a way of unfolding more knowledge of our metaphysical origin.”²⁸ Our stories continue to resonate in the land where we were born, and even years after uprooting, they vibrate throughout the place and its people, waiting to be felt. Perhaps it is this feeling that so many of us experience in our travels, but never fully comprehend. Novelist Scott Russell Sanders writes of this visceral connection that we share with the world:

I have been thinking about stories of place in an effort to understand how the geography of mind adheres to the geography of earth. Each of us carries an inward map on which are inscribed, as on Renaissance charts, the seas and continents known to us. On my own map, the regions where I have lived most attentively are crowded with detail, while regions I have only glimpsed from windows or imagined from hearsay are barely sketched, and out at the frontiers of my knowledge the lines dwindle away into blankness. Sacred stories arise from our intuition that beneath the flow of creation there is order, within chance there is permanence, within time, eternity.²⁹

We are but a physical representation of the deep and complex lineage of meaning that precedes us. Sander’s ideas of the relationship between our inward geography of mind and the physical geography of the world includes our ties with the built environment, which is a firm and often iconic representation within our memories, and one of our mechanisms to locate ourselves.

When I dug up the original survey of my family compound, drawn in 1978, I was pleasantly surprised that the site was given a name and not a mere lot number. The neighbouring parcels were labelled with the full name of its inhabitants and framed the property, which was formally titled “The Gem” and divided into five smaller parcels for my mother and her siblings. After finding the survey, I unearthed a host of stories that preceded me, which connect the home and its inhabitants to a much longer lineage, deepening their relationship with the place.

Revisiting my childhood memories and sharing them with others reminds me of how colossal the world appeared back then. In my memory, the wooden rafters that spanned the back veranda of my childhood home appeared so high that I would not imagine reaching them. Today, I can lean my arms against them and duck my head as I enter the house to visit my grandparents. Realizing the inherent discrepancy in my own memory motivated me to search deeper within the place where I was born and the people who live there. It became clear to me that my memories were strengthened with a greater knowledge of the place where they originated. Understanding each person’s story helped me to locate my own narrative within that fabric, and deepen my understanding of why the built world was so crucial to shaping all of this.

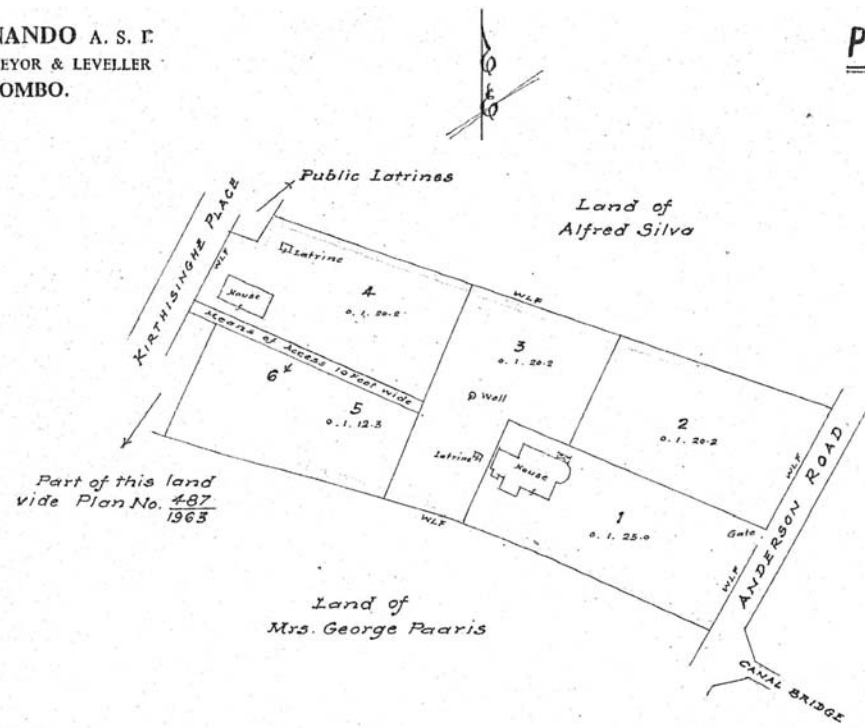
The mnemonic process is inevitably flawed due to our inability to fully recall a memory in its most accurate and unaffected form, but its ability to give us context and bring stability to our lives is fundamental. If our senses fail due to age or disability, we rely on the threads of memory to connect us to all that is familiar in our lives. Michael Ondaatje, in his recollections upon returning to his homeland and spending time with his mother, shares an intimate moment that displays the incredible potential of memory to place us:

As I prepare to leave she walks with me, half deaf and blind, under several ladders in her living room that balance paint and workmen, into the garden where there is a wild horse, a 1930 car splayed flat on its axles and hundreds of flowering bushes so that her eyes swim out into the dark green and unfocused purple. There is very little now that separates the house from the garden. Rain and vines and chickens move into the building. Before I leave, she points to a group photograph of a fancy dress party that shows herself and my grandmother Lalla among the crowd. She has looked at it for years and has in this way memorized everyone’s place in the picture. She reels off names and laughs at the facial expressions she can no longer see. It has moved, tangible, palpable, into her brain, the way memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here, the way her tiny body steps into mine as intimate as anything I have witnessed and I have to force myself to be gentle with this frailty in the midst of my embrace.³⁰

Ondaatje’s writing exemplifies the different ways with which we use memory to locate ourselves. In describing the decline of his mother’s senses, he draws upon his own. His visual description of his home, from the dilapidated yard to the colourful flowering bushes, serve to orient the reader and give context to his story. His writing is a reminder that our memories cannot be separated from our senses or our body relative to the environment in which they occurred.

R. I. FERNANDO A. S. F.
 LICENSED SURVEYOR & LEVELLER
 NEGOMBO.

PLAN No.188



Surveyed & Partitioned on
 24th May 1978

Scale of 2 Chains to an Inch

PLAN

Reference
 W.L.F. Wire Live Fence



Figure 14: The original site survey of the family property.
 Drawn by: R.I. Fernando

Figure 15: A sketch of the family property from the front gate.
 Drawn by: Author.

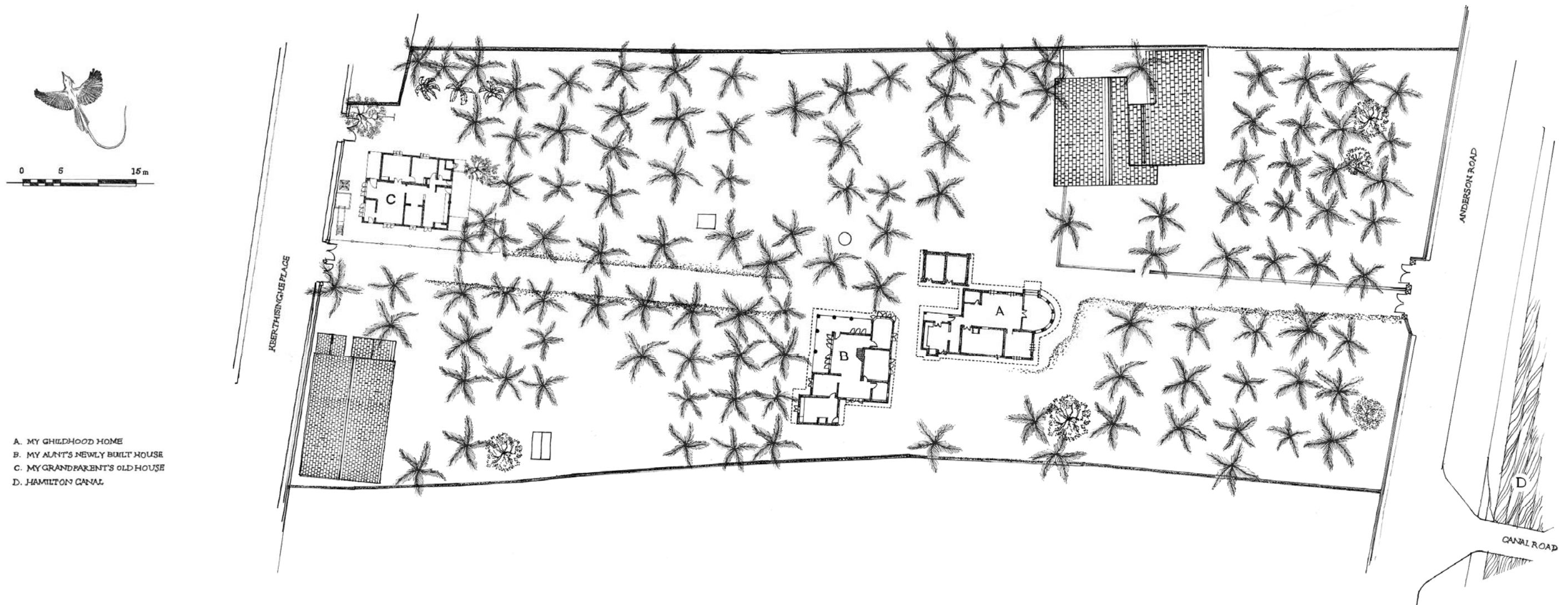


Figure 16: The site plan of my family property.
 Drawn by: Author.



Figure 17
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Notebook II

Reaching

November 25, 2014

Several months before leaving Canada I had discovered the architecture of Sri Lanka's most revered architect, Geoffrey Bawa. I learned that Bawa's work has had a profound influence not only on Sri Lankan architecture but South Asia at large. He was a strong believer of the country's vernacular and was well-known for the creation of an architectural style called Tropical Modernism.

Geoffrey Bawa passed away in 2003, but his legacy continues through the work of several of his students and associates. One such colleague is a distinguished architect named Anjalendran, who worked with Bawa for ten years before starting his own practice from his mother's veranda. He is deeply rooted in tradition but follows his own mind and the footsteps of his predecessor.

I was fortunate to connect with Anjalendran through a dear friend's colleague, who had worked with him. Shortly after reaching Sri Lanka, I sent him an email to which I received a quick and precise response:

Dear Sir Anjalendran,

I hope this email finds you well.

I am very grateful to have connected with Hussain, Moeez and Haris through a very good friend of mine who is now pursuing his Master of Architecture in Canada alongside me. They have said such wonderful things about their experience in Sri Lanka, especially their time spent with you and many others.

Throughout the past year of my studies, I have worked towards producing a research document for my thesis entitled: The role and potential of educational facilities – such as the elementary school – in fostering learning and strengthening communities in post-civil war Sri Lanka. I am very interested in the relationship between learning and space but also in the greater effect that the process of designing and building a school could have on a community. Although I have learned a lot in the last two terms (eight months), I could not be certain whether my research, thoughts, and design ideas for my thesis will have any real agency in the social, political and cultural context of Sri Lanka. In other words, my fear is that I would not be able to engage with and respond to the reality and the nuances of the place and its people.

It was primarily my memories attending school as a child, prior to my family's migration to Canada at the age of seven that lead me to pursue this thesis. However, my plans to visit Sri Lanka also stem from my desire to reconnect and better understand, both architecturally and personally, the place I was born and hopefully one-day be able to contribute to it.

I landed in Sri Lanka on the 17th at 5 a.m. on an incredible misty morning. I have since been spending time with my family in Negombo, who I had not seen in over six years. I have no words to express how it feels to be back home - especially to be able to spend time with my grandparents.

During my time here, I would be delighted to have the opportunity to meet with you to share and learn more about Sri Lanka, its people and its architecture. Please let me know if this would be possible and when would work best for you.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Take care,

Jaliya

.....
Dear Jaliya Fonseka,

Your email was expected.

Things are getting a bit tight, so please call early and make an appointment. I am afraid tomorrow and the day after are out.

But please call me to make an appointment.

I enclose a location map

Wishes

November 27, 2014

Meeting Zaheer:

Just over a week after landing in Sri Lanka I was zipping down Negombo Road towards the Capital to visit Anjalendran, who lives in a suburb of the city of Colombo named Battaramulla. Within moments of stepping into the rickshaw, my driver Zaheer and I were as deep in conversation as we were in traffic. He was comfortable projecting his voice over the chaos of the streets, but I found myself having to yell for him to hear me. Zaheer expertly threaded the rickshaw between the giant, lumbering buses and trucks. I held tightly onto the steel bars that separated me from the driver. My eyes were glued to the road, except for when I nodded into Zaheer's rear-view mirror in acknowledgment of his ongoing conversation.

Zaheer was a good friend of the family and the only driver my uncle and aunt trusted to take me to Colombo. I was relieved to see that he checked over his shoulder before switching lanes, which made me believe that he was not trying to get us both killed. Every so often, buses pushed their way through the traffic, inches away from us, their two-tone air horns blasting into my ears. I found myself releasing one hand from the steel bars, searching the surface of the warm leather seat for a belt, only to remember that rickshaw's were not equipped with them.

Zaheer frequently pointed out of the rickshaw throughout the trip, while sharing with me a detailed history of the cities and towns we sped by. He was informed by the spectrum of everyday life: people he passed, restaurants and shops he frequented, and even the atmosphere of the roads he knew all too well. He was aware when buildings had been refurbished, replaced or destroyed over the year; when political powers changed and renewed old roads to accommodate themselves; and where to find shortcuts when riots, rallies and festivities spilled onto the streets. He rarely searched for an address, and instead relied on iconic buildings, religious shrines, and the face of the street, which he could draw as precisely as a portrait of himself in a mirror. He had practiced intuitive ways to measure the road: arm's lengths, strides, or the phrase "a few minutes past the roundabout."

Zaheer's masterful display of navigating Sri Lanka's streets with his senses was an inspiring reminder of the power of the human body, and the role of the rickshaw driver was transformed by his senses and embodied the reading of his environment. Aside from my realization that the streets of Sri Lanka were not for the faint-hearted, one thing was clear—the streets were as much a part him as he was of them.



Figure 18: Zaheer standing proudly next to his diesel rickshaw, Negombo.

By the time we reached our destination I had a throbbing headache from the fumes, heat and two-tone horns, still ringing in my head. The rickshaw is hardly a comfortable means of travel for long distances but it best serves short, local outings. This had been a three hour drive.

Anjalendran stood tall behind the vibrantly painted door of his quaint home. He introduced himself and welcomed me, holding his excited dog Kalu with one hand. Before he invited me in, he requested that I visit a home that he had designed for the entrepreneur Miles Young, called the “Crooked House.” I followed his helper Kumar down the street, accompanied by a few of his architecture student interns. We approached a very simple building and awaited the gatekeeper who watched over the empty home six months of the year. He eventually appeared out of the street corner, holding up his sarong with one hand and a set of keys in the other.

We entered into a vestibule that immediately revealed the essence and beauty of the home. Daylight entered the small courtyard, softening the heavy stone and concrete walls. The surfaces had aged like a serene landscape. Edges were dulled, but perfectly, such that it was tempting to run my fingers along them. The entire space longed for the rain that frequently entered it—the monsoon room. I imagined the bell that hung at the edge of the vestibule being rung more frequently by the rain than any visitors. A few steps into the small courtyard space and I was transported outside again. I started to question where the inside ended and where the outside began, or whether there was any form of boundary at all.

The inside of the home shared these sentiments. Each space had its own unique and harmonious relationship with the outside. I did not think I could be more moved by my experience of the home, until the moment when I entered the courtyard. Upon stepping out onto the small red pebbles scattered about, the wind directed my eyes to the leaves that lightly shaded the space. Without even knowing it, my headache dissolved to the sound of leaves waving to the wind and the melodic chirping of birds I couldn’t see. Within minutes, the cool breeze transported me hundreds of miles away from the heart of the city to a remote forest sanctuary.



Figure 19 (above): Entrance vestibule of the Crooked House, Colombo

Figure 20 (following page): A view into the courtyard of the Crooked House.



I was nervous returning to meet Anjalendran back at his home. He offered me a tour of the place, which revealed itself around a small courtyard that separated his living space from his small office. The spaces within his home were much smaller than his design for the Crooked House, but I began to see similarities that constantly challenged my perception whether I was inside or out. There was no real indication of an enclosure, aside from a thin metal screen, that disappeared out of focus. The entire house wrapped around the courtyard and welcomed the rain. It was the subtle design choices that defined the place: the colours, textures and the simplicity of the materials. Although the open spaces were seemingly large, they were made intimate by the aid of all the things that filled it. Anjalendran's home was crowded with "small things," which is what he called his magnificent collection of relics and artwork at the lecture he gave at Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel in Colombo. My eyes were constantly enticed as I walked through his home. Kalu followed closely at my heels.

Once I had returned to the ground level, Anjalendran extended his arms towards a beautifully upholstered concrete seat, built into his living room. He sat down beside me in his planter's chair, which is known in Sinhalese as a *hansi putuwa*. All types of relics, sculptures and artwork surrounded me, making it difficult to focus on the man who sat promptly in front of me. He beckoned his students to join our conversation, and they left the small office space and shuffled across the courtyard before huddling up against each other on his narrow staircase.

Anjalendran then said, "So tell me," and after a pause, "What is your story?" In a panic, I remembered that I was unsure what exactly I was doing in Sri Lanka. All I knew was that I had a strong desire to be here. Not knowing how to answer his question, I resorted to the only thing I knew of my thesis, which was limited to an abstract I had written months before my trip. Without hesitation I recited words from the abstract as if I had a sheet of paper in front of me. Anjalendran watched me, puzzled. I rambled nervously, extracting thoughts that I thoroughly believed in, but had not fully realized:

Thesis Abstract:

Jaliya Fonseka

April 09, 2014

The role and potential of educational facilities – such as the elementary school – in fostering learning and strengthening communities in post-civil war Sri Lanka.

The country's relentless past of decades long civil war and the largest tsunami that the world has faced, still echoes in day-to-day life. In a time of complete devastation, the struggle to recover often presents the greatest opportunity to re-envision the notion of how built form can influence social change. One of the most important institutions for long term redevelopment is that of the school; it is the built form of a school that has the capacity to create environments that facilitate social change. The school is instrumental in shaping the psyche and thought process of a student. Occupying such buildings for many consecutive years instills certain characteristics in students that they carry with them throughout their lives.

In the eyes of a student, a school is far more than an educational facility. It is a second home, often a place of comfort, even a place of refuge from the harsher elements of the world. In this light, the built form of a school has to be nuanced to the contextual specificities of its culture and environment. Students in school are more likely to be successful and motivated if they are put in a learning environment that lends itself to discovery, exploration, and divergent thinking. They are not only places for growth and study, but also a hub for social interaction and activity. The configuration of certain programs, its adjacencies and their thresholds, all elements of architecture, has a significant effect in shaping a student's experience. The aesthetic of the building can inspire a certain sense of pride and belonging that subconsciously influences students to be bound to the phenomenon of values and principles that their school represents. This is what architecture does: it gives different people a different sense of belonging and loyalty, and a totally unique mindset and eyes to see the world.

A school's relationship with its community is crucial in understanding the specificities and demographics of the community in order to be able to engage with it. A well maintained relationship with the community results in an inter-communal dialog that reveals various needs and demands from the community that the school could potentially address. Knowing and understanding the community means knowing and understanding the students and their parents – an essential part of adapting the school's program and curriculum to best suit their learning needs. This will encompass not only the schools relationship to its greater urban fabric and its effect on the countries growth and culture but also the effect it has on the growth of each individual student.

ANJALENDRAN: Okay. The question I think you asked me is: given a problem of educational buildings in the tropical country, what are the parameters one should consider? How would one approach it?

JALIYA: Well, I should have also said that I think education itself and educational facilities can actually have a greater potential in society and societal issues, and also issues of reconciliation.

ANJALENDRAN: Ah, yeah, that is only possible if the government allows it. [He laughs] It's not possible if the government doesn't allow it. No, I can't answer that. You see, that type of thing, is trying to save the world...and I wouldn't know how to, you know. Believe me, you know I will never get to that state in life, okay?

What you can do is to ask a little more humbler question: What buildings can I do [design], which will give me a better understanding of education than any old building. That's the kind of question I can answer. Whether you know if education can solve reconciliation and all. All these have nothing to do with architecture—I don't think you get an answer, and it's too far and doesn't come within that. I will always restrict myself to architecture.

Now, the challenge would be, whether one could recreate that in a contemporary way. For example, in Ruhunu [University of Ruhunu, Matara], Geoffrey [Bawa] is very clear that you don't study only inside the classroom, you study outside the classroom. That's why there are miles and miles of lakes [and outdoor spaces around the University]. You will find that in Hastorf Courts Complex most of the litigants meet their clients around the veranda before the case and then you go into the courts. So if you build courts without a veranda, the whole process is taken out.

A lot of Western thinking and education, which seems to emphasize function, misses out on a lot of things that are important but not functional. [The students were whispering to one another and Anjalendran told them that they could leave for the day if they wished.] All you can say is: I've looked at the traditional building forms. I've looked at the history and contemporary architecture of Sri Lanka. I've looked at the educational buildings of Sri Lanka. And I find that, perhaps these do perform their function, these don't perform their function. That's all you can say. Because you are asking a multi-variable problem—there is no simple answer.

As long as you set out to investigate, not to form a conclusion or say there is an answer. There is no answer. All you can do is set out to investigate something.

I would go with an open mind—not a conclusion.

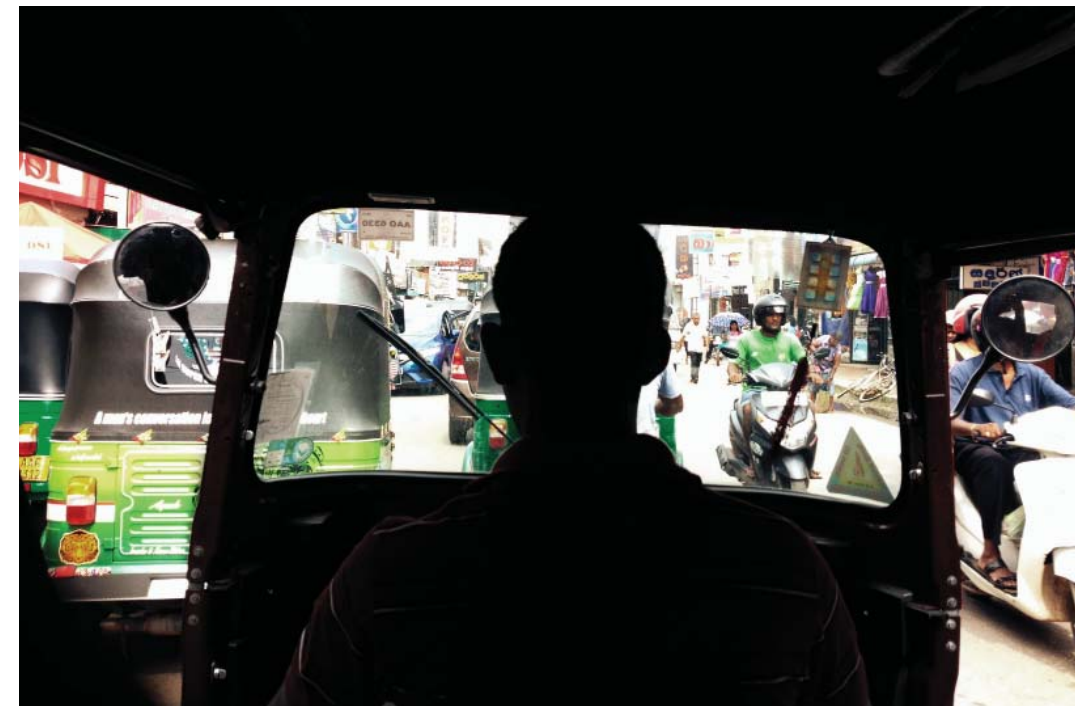


Figure 21: Architect Anjalendran's residence, Colombo.

*Seeking means: to have a goal, but finding means: to be free,
to be receptive, to have no goal. —Siddhartha, Herman Hesse.*

I climbed back into the rickshaw profoundly moved. Zaheer drove through the narrow streets while I sat quietly, somewhat embarrassed but completely content. The man who has lived most of his life in this country, and deemed the “Architect of Sri Lanka,” had just told me that the ambitions of my thesis were unachievable.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Anjalendran’s humbling words as Zaheer pushed and pulled the Rickshaw through the evening rush hour. I forgot about the three choked lanes of lethargic traffic on either side of me. The clamour and noise dissipated. I had not realized that I had been trying to take on such a profound undertaking, a task well beyond my grasp. I felt relieved of a huge weight that I had placed on my shoulders. After months of endless internal dialogue concerning the outcome of my thesis, I finally felt the freedom to pursue it.



*Figure 22: Stuck in rush hour
traffic, Colombo.*

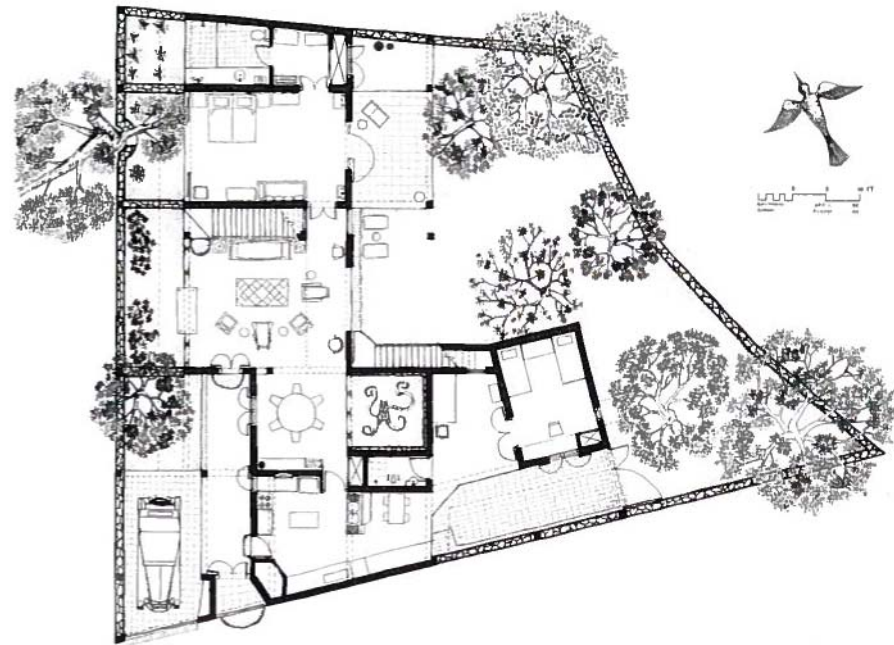


Figure 23 (above): First floor plan of the Crooked House, Battaramulla, 2004-08. Designed by: Anjalendran. Drawn by: Anjalendran's office.

Figure 24 (opposite): Floor plans and section of Anjalendran's home/office, Battaramulla, 1991-93. Designed by: Anjalendran. Drawn by: Anjalendran's office.

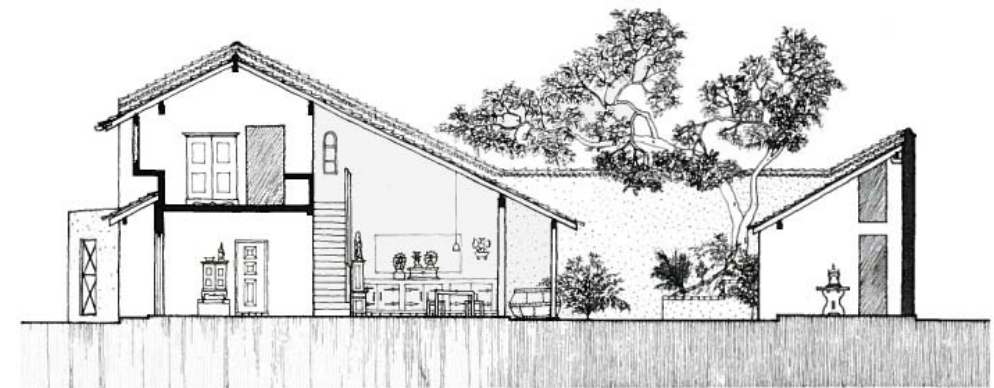
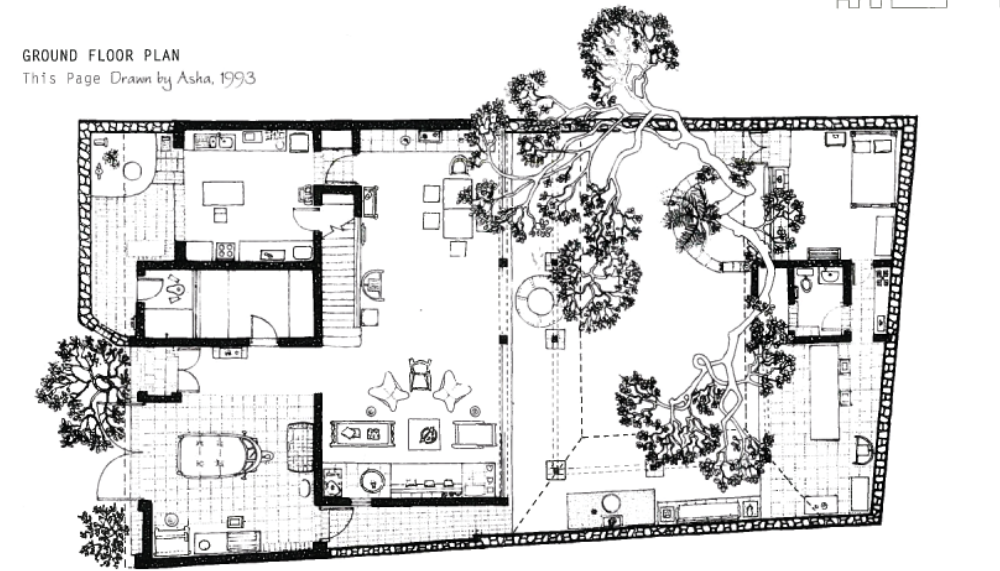
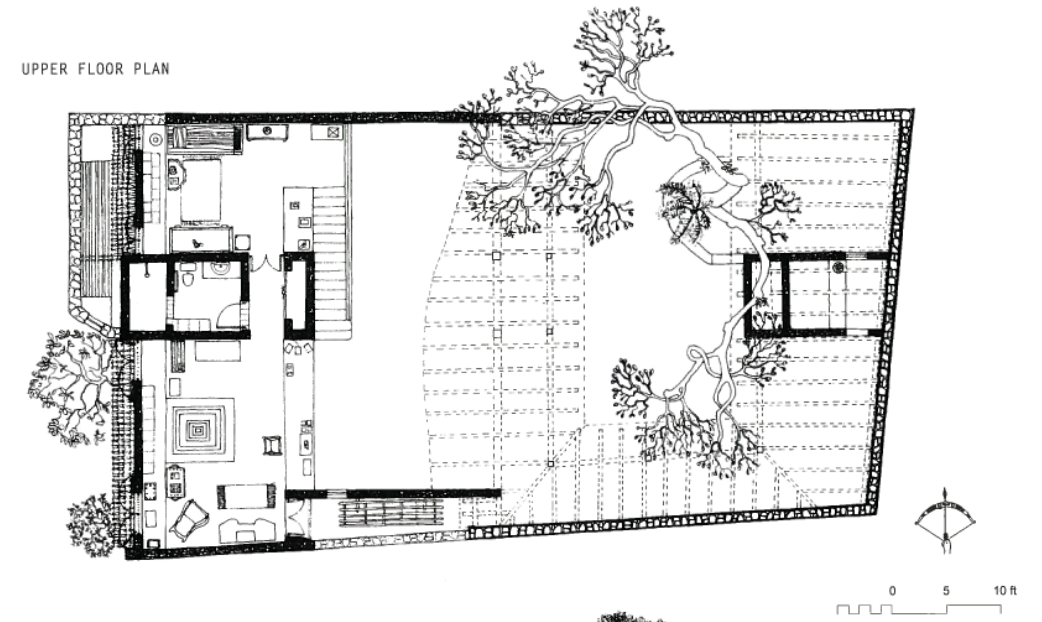




Figure 25
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Notebook III

Climbing

December 07, 2014

Coincidentally, a friend of mine was visiting Sri Lanka for a wedding. There was something serendipitous about the thought of us meeting in Sri Lanka because it would be the first time we would see each other in five years. I got in touch with him and we decided to meet up and plan a trip to climb Adam's Peak: Sri Lanka's most sacred mountain.

One night, we met at his friend Ramzy's apartment in Colombo. The four of us, with the addition of one of their friends, finished a bottle of arrack—a distilled alcoholic drink made from the fermented sap of coconut flowers. The clock read 3 a.m., and our anticipation to climb the mountain was seeping out of our bodies like the sweat from the evening humidity. After lying down on the cool tiled floor, we decided to begin our journey before the rush and heat that would arrive with the morning. The city was a ghost town by night. We were all asleep a few minutes aboard the bus, sliding side to side, colliding with one another as the bus rolled through the empty streets.

Eventually, we found ourselves squeezed in to the backseat of a bright green rickshaw, heading up the side of a mountain. We were in Kitulgala, a small town in the country's wet-zone, which received two monsoons a year. The town was entwined with the Kelani River, which followed our route all the way from Colombo to Adam's Peak. Somewhere along the windy path, we decided to revive our sleepy bodies and jumped into the water.

The river was high and flowed rapidly with the monsoon rains. As I was carried along by the river between the lush, green banks, I felt reinvigorated by the cold waters that rushed through me.



Figure 26: Floating down the Kelani River, Kitulgala.



*Figure 27 (top): Resting place
behind the trees, Kitulgala.*

*Figure 28 (bottom):
Hatton railway station. 9:30 p.m.*

After our detour, we weren't on the road for long before pulling over to the side. Little did I know, there was an oasis hidden beyond the trees, fifty feet below the side of the road. We descended through the dense forest to the bottom, where we stumbled upon a row of raised huts that faced a different portion of the Kelani River.

The huts sat lightly on the landscape, reminding me of the *ambalama*: a small structure that serves as a resting place for the wayfarer, and one of Sri Lanka's most basic and traditional forms of architecture. Six tree trunks, approximately five feet in length made up the base of the hut and held a thin wooden platform. Thin branches skirted the sides of the tree trunks and extended above them to meet with a series of branches that made up the roof frame. Attached to the frame was another series of branches that ran in the opposite direction and held long pieces of woven coconut tree leaves, which kept the rain out. Like the *ambalama*, the huts were constructed with wooden members that were notched or tied together, embodying non-permanence. Each hut gave the impression that it could be picked up and carried away, that it was only occupying that space for a moment.

Although this humble retreat was worthy of a full day's expedition, we decided that it would be wise to take an hour-long nap before catching the next bus to the base of Adam's Peak. After all, we had not slept the night before.

Maybe it was the calming sound of the river, the cool breeze against our tired bodies or the lack of any sense of time, but we slept well past our alarms. When I awoke, the tranquil forest was blazing with the sound of our phone alarms. As I sat up inside the hut and stared bleary-eyed into the sunset, I processed the very real possibility that this mishap could ruin all of our plans.

Although we were of the understanding that we had overslept a few hours, none of us had the energy to be concerned—our bodies simply didn't allow it. We quickly packed up our belongings and climbed up the side of the hill in darkness. It was the first time I had noticed that the roads were not lit, and were only illuminated by the occasional headlights of passing vehicles. We spotted the faint light of a rickshaw weaving around the side of the mountain like the pulsing body of a firefly, and eagerly flagged it down.

The conversation was tense as our driver rushed along the mountainside towards the nearest transit station. We may have already missed the last bus up to the base of the mountain and we discussed whether we would forfeit the trip and spend the night returning home. After all, my three companions had to be back in Colombo the next night.

Our debate overwhelmed the driver and he frequently looked over his shoulder in an attempt to make sense of us all. The rain joined in on our conversation and the only moments of pause were when we heard the rumbling of an approaching bus. We stared in silence as the driver hugged the inside of the road to avoid being crushed, or thrown off the edge of the mountain.

The transit terminal was desolate, except for a few stray dogs finding shelter from the rain. We had missed the last bus. Before parting with the rickshaw driver, we had asked him whether he would be willing to drive us up to the base of the mountain. His face lit up and eyes widened as he said “No, no. No, no...” We were later informed by a local man that the trek up to the base of the mountain, beyond this point, was steep and dangerous. Smaller vehicles avoided this route, especially after sunset when their headlights barely illuminated a few meters ahead, making it difficult for larger vehicles to see them.

We were on the verge of giving up, but none of us truly wanted to. As a last attempt to salvage our trip, we walked through the local streets asking rickshaw drivers whether they would be willing to take us up to the base of the mountain. Most of them were sound asleep, newspapers covering their face. After a number of rejections, we headed back towards the train station, hoping to catch the next train back to Colombo.

We were no longer aware of the rainfall that persisted throughout the night. As we neared the station, a man rushing in the opposite direction slowed down to ask us where we were headed. Like most others we had encountered on our trip, he recognized right away that we were not locals. He turned out to be a rickshaw driver and was headed back to his rickshaw to end his night. He asked us to accompany him back to his rickshaw, where he agreed to drive us up to the mountain. He kicked his rickshaw to a start and steered to the nearest petrol station. Overjoyed by this fortunate encounter, we put all our trust in him to transport us to the base of Adam’s Peak.

On Climbing

Throughout my travels, I frequently ruminated about my thesis. Most of my contemplation occurred on rocking buses, rickshaws and long walks through unfamiliar streets. My unsettled mind was my unflagging companion. On my journey to climb Adam’s Peak, it reminded me of the incredible expedition of a man whose unfulfilled goal of climbing K2 led him to pursue an entirely different, but ultimately grander journey. I had read the story of Greg Mortenson in “Three Cups of Tea”. For Mortenson, the journey up treacherous mountains led to an opportunity to build schools for children in impoverished towns along the Karakorum in Northern Pakistan. The entire journey was challenging, but a particular portion of it stood out in my mind.

After searching the mountains, Mortenson had located a reputable source to purchase materials for building a school, in a small village named Korphe. He traveled across the Himalayas to stock a truck with all the supplies and materials needed to build the school. On his trek back, hundreds of feet above ground, he discovered that all his materials had been stolen. Mortenson eventually found his supplies, which had been ransacked by one of his companions, and proceeded to Korphe. Upon his arrival, he met with the village elder, Haji Ali:

“I brought everything we need to build a school,” he said in Balti, as he’d been rehearsing. “All the wood, and cement and tools. It’s all in Skardu right now [...] I came back to keep my promise,” Mortenson said, looking Haji Ali in the eye. “And I hope we can begin building it soon, Inshallah.”

“Doctor Greg [...] we want very much a school in Korphe. But we have decided. Before the ibex can climb K2, he must learn to cross the river. Before it is possible to build a school, we must build a bridge. This is what Korphe needs now,” said the village elder.³¹

Once Greg had come to terms with the fact that materials could not be transported into the village without an adequate bridge, he realized that he may never find the funding he needed for the endeavour and returned to his apartment in Berkeley, California. One day, while lying in bed, he received a phone call from Lou Reichardt—a mountaineer who had summited K2, and one of Mortenson’s heroes. “Pull yourself together, Greg. Of course you’ve hit a few speed bumps,” Reichardt said, “But what you’re trying to do is much more difficult than climbing K2.” Mortenson was aware that Lou Reichardt knew something about suffering and undertaking difficult goals. With Reichardt’s insight, he realized that he hadn’t failed. He just hadn’t completed the climb—yet.³²



Figure 29 (top): Delhouse bus station & mountain beyond. 2:15 a.m.

Figure 30 (bottom): A narrow bridge along the footpath.

The mind includes more than the intellect. It contains a history of what we learn through our feet. —E. V. Walter

A small village sat quietly at the base of the mountain with storefronts along its edges. We stepped out of the rickshaw onto cool, moist soil. The bright lights attached to the storefronts illuminated a variety of clothing and food items, distracting our eyes from the tiny speckles of light that followed the mountain path. Like a constellation, it flickered faintly in the distance. While I stared at the mesmerizing silhouette of the mountain, I realized that this would be my first climb.

We hastily devoured a platter of “short eats”: deep fried pastries filled with potato, meat and a mixture of spices. We washed it all down with a steaming cup of ginger tea before storing our belongings in a small room, which the store owners had offered. Then it was onwards along the path to the top.

Every year, 20,000 pilgrims climb Adam’s Peak for their own moral and spiritual beliefs. The pilgrimage marks a journey that Buddhists believe Buddha took on his path to enlightenment: the peak bearing a mark of his footprint before he stepped into the clouds for an undisturbed meditation. Brahmins believe that it is the summit that bares the footprint of Shiva, and Muslims and Christians regard the peak as the initial stepping point of Adam, the first ancestor, after being exiled from the Garden of Eden.

The mountain is typically climbed at night to avoid the intense daytime heat. Normally, the path would be lit by the vending stalls but most of them were still locked up from the rainy season, when the path is closed.

As we continued up steps and along a clearly marked pathway, the realization that we were the only ones on the mountain became more evident. For a long portion of our walk, rows of Buddhist flags hung over our heads and fluttered in the cold air. Either side of our path was indiscernibly dark. The indiscernible darkness loomed on either side of the path, and our appreciation for the ground we tread upon grew as we climbed.

Some ways up, we noticed that we had company. Two stray dogs from the base of the mountain had been following alongside us. They seemed as overjoyed by our company as we were of theirs. We fed them a few morsels of food and they proceeded to accompany us up the mountain.



Figure 31 (above): The path lit all the way up the mountain.

Figure 32 (following spread): The steep climb nearing Adam's Peak.

Rain fell on the cool stone steps that carried us up the mountain. As it persisted, the ground around us was battered and portions of the path became sore with thick puddles of mud, which we cautiously avoided. If I hadn't noticed earlier in the day, I couldn't ignore now that with each step, my body screamed in pain and our lack of sleep quickly caught up to us. I remembered that my uncle had suggested engaging in conversation to pass the time but none of us had the energy to hold a conversation, let alone speak. The large silhouette of the mountain loomed over us each time we stopped for breath and there was no indication that we were getting any closer.

In an attempt to break the eeriness, I searched my phone for a soundtrack. At first, nothing I found felt appropriate, but I eventually stumbled upon Zakir Hussain's "Making Music." The soundtrack lifted our tired bodies and surrounded us like a warm blanket. The soothing sound of the flute was the soul and the powerful rhythm of the tabla gave us a heartbeat—an energy to follow.

As we neared the top, we no longer had to make a conscious effort to lift our legs with each step. The strain had shifted to our arms, as we gripped the steel railings on either side of the steep path, which became narrower as we ascended. At the edge of the uneven precipice, with a cool but persistent wind washing over me, it felt like clinging to the pulpit of a sailboat's bow, surging across an ocean. For a moment I lost focus, tripping forward onto my next step, but my arm refused to release the handrail as if I would fall off the face of the earth. We eagerly pushed through the last steps, nearing the 7,359 foot tall peak. The last few notes of the soundtrack rang in the darkness as we reached the top.

Walking on flat ground had never felt so comforting. At the entrance we removed our shoes and socks, noticing that our bodies were steaming as the heat dissipated into the crisp, cold air. We began to explore, realizing that we were the only ones up there. The two stray dogs hesitantly followed us around a platform that was not much larger than the footprint of the shop where we had left our belongings. Just before we completed the full loop of the platform, a man startled us, chasing the dogs towards the exit yelling, "This place is sacred!" We were sad to see them get chased out. After all, they had traveled up the entire mountain alongside us.

There was a seating platform facing the direction of sunrise and we all huddled together. The cold made its way deep into our bodies and we shivered uncontrollably. I reached into my backpack for a dry pair of socks and I found a blanket that my aunt had packed. Gradually, groups of people entered the mountain top, most of them foreigners. Before we knew it, we were surrounded by people clustering for warmth.



December 08, 2014

Color is where the brain and the universe meet.
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

We were all from different walks of life, from different parts of the world and we climbed the mountain for our own particular reasons. Yet in that moment, a quiet yearning filled each of us as we stared out into the horizon, waiting for the sun to rise from the great arc of the world.

The rain had stopped when dawn broke and our eyes searched the abyss, catching glimpses of the landscape. There was a deafening silence as the sun peaked from behind the mountain tops. Large swaths of colour washed the sky as if a painter applied a stroke every few minutes. The clouds gave way to hues of deep blue, soaking everything around us. Then the remnants of clouds absorbed the sun's radiance, glowing bright red and orange. The tones penetrated so deep I began to question the colour of the trees, the clouds and my own skin.

Completely drowned in awe, I wondered whether this natural phenomenon existed in my everyday life. Upon seeing the most magnificent spectacle of nature, I began to wonder why each day's experience didn't prompt my heart and mind to search deeper. I thought about the thousands of pilgrims that climbed the mountain in search of something, and whether they retained the qualities of the climb in their everyday life. Whether the spectacle of the sunrise stayed with them throughout their lives.

We proceeded to climb a few steps onto another platform, where we rang a bell to celebrate our ascent to the top. And as the sound of the bell echoed into the vast landscape, the sound of something much more subtle reverberated deep inside of me.



Figure 33 (top): A view from the platform of Adam's Peak. 7,359 feet.

Figure 34 (bottom): Sunrise at Adam's Peak. 6:15 a.m.





Figure 35 (previous page): A view from the highest point of the platform. 6:30 a.m.

Figure 36 (above): A Buddhist monk embracing the sunrise. 7:35 a.m.

Earth, isn't this what you want: rising up inside us invisibly once more?
—Rainer Maria Rilke

Each step down was a step deeper into my thoughts. Nightfall had been lifted like a veil off the serene landscape. I was seeing it all for the first time: the sun, radiating effortlessly through the soft sky; the bundles of cloud below me, floating between the mountaintops as if they were large pockets of water. The landscape had never appeared so pure, sublime, and perfect. It was the very thing that filled my lungs, and yet what left me breathless.

I could only describe the subtle sensation that emanated from within me as a connection to all that was around me. A realization that perhaps my place in the world was no different than the clouds that caressed the mountaintops and the rivers that flowed swiftly beneath. Everything in the landscape retained a vibrancy that was boundless. As this sensation penetrated deeper into the corners of my body, I couldn't help but feel that I have long lacked this connection, and that it was entering me for the first time.



Figure 37



Figure 38: The view from my aunt's front veranda in Walahapitiya.

December 09, 2014

I awoke early one morning to the sound of roosters that I didn't recognize. I was at my aunt's house in Walahapitiya, where my paternal grandmother was visiting. My father's extended family lived in a more rural part of Sri Lanka, two hours north of Negombo. Everyone was already awake, going about their daily activities when I walked into the kitchen and sipped the hot cup of tea my aunt had prepared for me. I carried it to the front veranda and sat for a moment enjoying the countless rows of slender coconut trees, weaving behind one another like the thick strands of a wool sweater.

I recalled my heart-thumping bus ride back from Adam's Peak. We were lucky to have found seats on the bus, which was packed from end to end as it descended the mountainside. It was impossible to rest my head on the seat in front of me as the crowd swayed from side to side. Each turn seemed to bring us closer to the edge of the hillside. My seat faced the wider landscape and we were so close to the edge that I was not able to see the ground beneath me. I wished to fall asleep but instead held my breath with each turn.

Halfway into a sharp turn, the driver slammed on the brakes. Everyone on the bus dropped like bowling pins as we screeched to a stop. While the crowd struggled onto their feet, there was a brief view out the front. Only the loud Sri Lankan dance music continued, rattling the speakers in the background. We had stopped face to face with an oncoming bus that had taken the turn just as quickly. The driver nodded his head while the other bus reversed, then he shifted back into gear and continued as if nothing had happened.

I was suddenly roused from my reverie by the startling appearance of a dark figure shuffling through the tops of the coconut trees. Once I stood up and focused my eyes into the distance, I realized that it was actually a man standing on a rope strung up between the trees. I later learned that it was his occupation to move from one tree to the next, placing a clay pot on the coconut flower to collect a sap, which was then boiled to make coconut treacle. He performed this ritual twice a day.

On Dwelling

Yet, architectural form is humanly meaningful only when it is experienced in resonance with life—real, remembered or imagined. —Juhani Pallasmaa

A month after arriving in Sri Lanka, I had fallen into the rhythm of everyday life. I saw my uncle driving off to the construction site early in the morning. My aunt prepared my cousins and rushed them off to school on her way to work. I helped my grandmother and grandfather make their way to the front veranda, where we sat in silence. When the bread truck announced its arrival with its familiar tune at four o'clock each evening, I would rush over and buy each person's favourite bun. Each of these daily rituals were savoured with a hot cup of tea.

Our everyday repeated actions and experiences become sedimented into the reality of a place, like images overlaid on each other. Author Sarah Robinson, in her book "Nesting: Body, Dwelling, Mind," writes that "dwelling is an exchange and fusion; as I settle in a space, the space settles in me and it turns into a ingredient of my sense of self."³³ The word "dwell" derives from the Greek "homois": meaning "of the same kind," which suggests that our home is an extension of ourselves. A dwelling is an exchange between body, mind and place. It is not simply the act of inhabiting a place, but the interactions that occur as a result of that relationship. Our built world is a facilitator of these interactions, and we should welcome them as we do visitors into our homes. In "A Hut of One's Own," author Ann Cline writes that "as we are born into air, we are born into buildings. After that, we tend to take both for granted."³⁴ Our frail bodies are so predisposed to buildings, we forget that they are not an extension of the earth or ourselves. It is easy to forget how sensitive our relationship with our world is and how critical our built form is to help support that.

The world we live in is full of meaning that stems from the relationships that arise from the contextual interaction between body, mind, and world. Dwelling is a dialogue we have with our environment that transcends the realm of our immediate shelter. It includes the coconut trees that stand lightly on the landscape and lean ever so gently to greet us. They loom over my childhood memories and weave into my dreams. As a storm approaches, a gust of wind blows open the windows and we rush to collect our clothes that hang drying between the trees. The mass of the rain falls onto the ground like a thick blanket, blowing the motionless air from outside into our homes. The gust of wind signifies a change in our dwelling habits—the monsoon rains have arrived at our doorstep. When the electricity is cut in the evening, to dwell is to gather around a candle, to fill the space of home as fully as the ambiance of the soft flickering flame.



Figure 39: The dog cage nested into the yard, nearing sundown, Negombo.



Figure 40: My grandparents' old home through the yard at dawn.

An Early Morning

Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. —Gaston Bachelard

My mother woke us at four in the morning with cups of tea clanking in both her hands. Made with powdered milk and heaps of sugar, the tea brought warmth to early mornings as we rushed to get ready. It was the day of our family trip, and the sun had not yet risen. The ever bustling yard was now silent and still, except for the pulsing green fireflies that flitted through the darkness. But each of the four houses on the property buzzed with activity; my aunts, uncles and cousins were packing their travel bags and snacks.

When I was prepared, I unlocked a number of whimsical locks on the back door and ran as quickly as I could through the shared wilderness of our backyard. I ran because of my excitement for the trip, but also from the fear of what may live in the dense foliage under the coconut trees on either side of my beaten path. I followed the dull yellow light of the incandescent bulb, which penetrated the thick darkness. It hung by a wire on the back of my grandparents' home, and swayed in the wind like the beam from a distant lighthouse. My grandparents' home, once inhabited by my mother and her siblings, sat simply on the opposite end of the yard behind the slender tree trunks.

As the light got brighter, I slowed down and caught my breath. I pushed through the unlatched door and into my grandparents' kitchen, where they sat with a cup of tea, taking small bites of bread marinated with marmite. They welcomed me with warm smiles and we sat silently for a moment. Soon, the sun would rise, bringing a chaos of sounds, smells and movement. A few more bites and sips of tea, and we were ready to depart on another family journey.

December 20, 2014

Living in me, borne in mind, these places make up the landscape on which I walk even when my feet are still. —Scott Russell Sanders

A white van was parked outside of my aunt's house. It was not yet 5 a.m. and Ananda, a friend of my uncle, had arrived to take us on a family trip to Nuwara Eliya. He had a large van and worked part time as a tour bus driver.

There were ten of us, which made for a tight squeeze in the van. Before leaving, we poked our heads into my grandparents' bedroom to say goodbye, since they couldn't come along with us. We had hired an additional caretaker for the duration of our travels, but all of us felt uneasy leaving them behind.

Throughout my stay, I always compared my travel plans against Anjalendran's suggestions. We were to pass a number of architectural sites that he had mentioned and these were integrated into our trip.

Once you cross a certain boundary, the buildings create a sense of tranquillity. So the Buddhists, in the built environment, have done two very significant things. Number one: if they found any organic things like a boulder, they incorporate it into the composition. That is a very Buddhist tradition. All Sinhalese buildings are north south—they are not aligned crookedly. That's one of the most unique things about Sri Lanka, Sinhalese architecture. All Sinhalese buildings are axial. It incorporates organic things in its composition. Number two: the Sinhalese have been good at creating a sense of tranquillity, given the building parameters.³⁵



*Figure 41: "Drummers' Hall,"
Embekka Temple, Kandy.*



Figure 42 (left): Wooden rafter detail called “Madol Kurupawa,” pinning 26 members without nails.

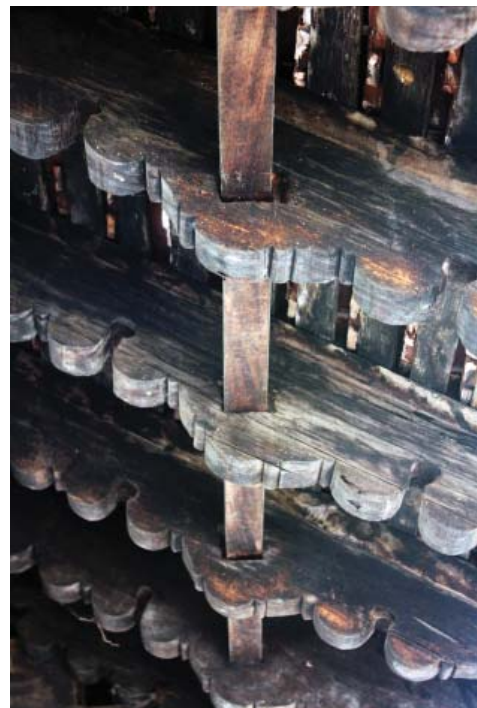


Figure 43 (right): Wooden beam running through ornate rafters.



Figure 44: Ornate hand-carved wooden pillar detail, each unique.

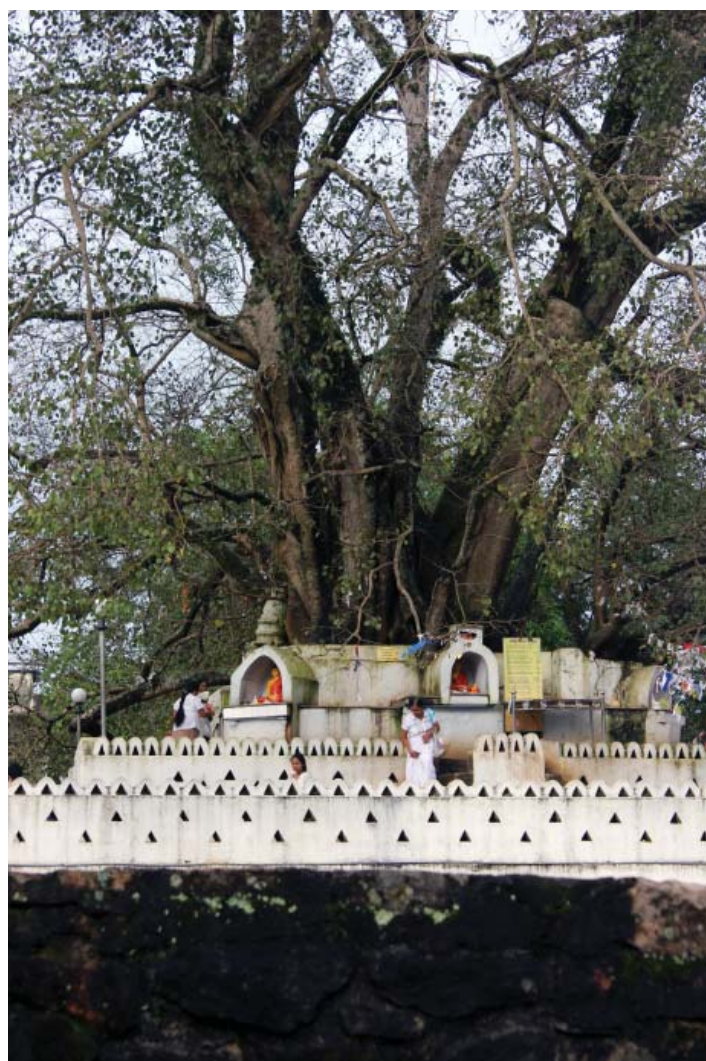


Figure 45 (above): Natha Devalaya Temple Square, Kandy.

Figure 46 (following spread): Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, Kandy, 6:20 a.m.

Our shoes and slippers were left at the entrance and our feet sunk into the cool morning sand. Within moments of entering the temple, I felt an incredibly calming sensation resonating from the place. There was only the rustling of the leaves on the elderly bodhi tree, the smell of incense burning in the distance, and the flickering oil lamps against the perfectly white walls.

The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, also known as the Sri Dalada Maligawa, is a Buddhist temple, which houses the relic of the tooth of the Buddha. The housing of the relic in the city of Kandy has a long history, dating back to the ancient kings of Sri Lanka. Because of this, it is regarded not only a place of worship, but also a centre of governance for the country.

Before we entered the temple, we reached a line of people, where a number of armed personnel screened each person before entry. My uncle leaned over and whispered that there had been a terrorist bombing at the temple several years ago, and that security had been introduced since.

The tranquillity of the place was diminished by this unnatural process. I walked slowly through the scanner and unzipped my camera bag for the security guards before walking through. I remembered an article I had read entitled “A Place Called Serendib: On War, Peace, and Silence in Sri Lanka” that had shed light on the perpetual silence the world endures after war or conflict. Author Darren C. Zook wrote:

The more we look at the world, the more silent we become. Or we orchestrate with great precision and acumen the movements and rhythm for a music and a chorus we cannot hear, or choose not to hear. In the silent amphitheatre, our memories atrophy, and our historians grow complacent and sleepy. It is within these silent aesthetics, these still-life ballets, that the armies of the mute attempt to give voice, or to faith-heal the deaf, by undertaking acts such as the bombing of the Temple of the Tooth in the highlands of Kandy in Sri Lanka: perhaps the assassins, whoever they were, hoped to shatter the complacent silence, to stop us from the act of forgetting, to insist with deadly persistence that we always remember what peace requires us to forget. And yet after the dust settles and the bodies are removed, we turn back to the silent symphony. For all its wars, genocides, disasters, famines, oppressions, persecutions, and extinctions, the world remains a frightfully quiet place.³⁶

As we continued deeper into the temple, my frustrations for the security procedures quickly dissipated. So had the dense fog that had momentarily captured the morning sunlight. And again, I only heard the leaves, the branches and the sound that my feet made with each step onto the moist white sand. Once again, there was silence.





*Figure 47: Winding
hillside roads, Nuwara Eliya.*

Nuwara Eliya was the sleepiest of the cities in Sri Lanka. There was an ephemeral quality to the roads that wound up the sides of the mountain and through the clouds, mist, and the endless rain that nourished the lush tea country. The city is known for its temperate climate and is home to Horton Plains National Park, a protected area covered by montane grassland and cloud forest. We were headed to the plains to visit the sheer precipice within the park named World's End.

Reaching Horton Plains was a tense drive, for there was only rain, and we could barely see the road out of the van. I constantly checked on Ananda in case he wanted to pull over until the rain eased, but his eyes did not leave the invisible road in front of him. He made his way through an increasingly rugged landscape without a hint of hesitation, leaving me to wonder whether his eyes even blinked.

When we reached Horton Plains, everyone was exhausted and reluctant to leave the warmth of the van. I zipped up my sweater and stepped out into a gust of wind that pulled me closer to the edge of the hill, where a few other vehicles had parked. I struggled towards a wooden shack, the only building in sight.

I wrestled the door shut behind me, and was surprised to find the inside of the hut pleasantly warm and dry. A few people were huddled around a table sipping tea. Not long after I sat down with my tea, the door flung open; a gust of wind had blown in several members of my family. We sipped our hot tea and snacked on a platter of biscuits, as the world outside shook furiously.

The restrooms were located in the back of the building, only accessible from the outside. I pushed the rear exit open with all my weight and took a few unsteady steps in the rain before entering the dark restroom. The only light was from a small window that framed the landscape beautifully. That contrasting image, so tranquil and unexpected, resonated with me like a melody, piercing through the turmoil of wind and rain. As the bathroom door shook with fury, I was granted an opportunity to see it differently—the misunderstood beauty.

We left the shelter of the hut and ventured through the heavy rain that mercifully paused to allow me to see my family behind me. There was only a path, beaten to the bone by previous travelers that stretched on through several feet of rain, mud and stone. There was something incredibly otherworldly about Horton Plains—a landscape that felt like it belonged in my dreams.

I scanned the landscape, realizing that there was not a single human being in sight. But when I returned my gaze to the path, my eyes caught a glimpse of something that brought me to a halt. A sambar deer stood in the distance, as quiet as the shrubbery around it.

By the time we reached World's End, none of us were the slightest bit excited about it. A small wooden platform reached out from the edge of the mountain into the abyss. It felt as though the clouds were carrying us—our wise brothers and sisters. The only trace of the earth beyond was a glimpse of the distant mountaintops, appearing in and out of view as the clouds rolled by like a river flowing through the rocky sky.



Figure 48: A framed view of Horton Plains, Nuwara Eliya.



Figure 49 (top): The beaten path to World's End, Horton Plains.

Figure 50 (bottom): A sambar deer blending into the landscape.



Figure 51: Looking out from World's End. A 4,000ft drop.

December 22, 2014

Anjalendran had designed an SOS Children's Village in Nuwara Eliya, which I contacted just before the trip and was relieved to hear that they were open to my visit on such short notice.

I learned that SOS Children's Villages is an international organization that provides care for orphans and children in poverty. At the core of every SOS Village is the "mother," who cares for up to ten children in a "family house." This ensures that the children grow up in a loving and supportive family environment, surrounded by their foster siblings and relatives.

We drove twenty minutes from the cottage we were staying at in the light rain before taking a sharp downward turn and pulling into a narrow driveway. I felt the damp air against my face when I hopped out of the van onto a beautiful cobble stone path. Grass and moss grew around it and absorbed the drops of rain as they landed. I gently knocked on the door of a beautiful old building and entered.

I was shown around the village by a kind man who had been working with the children for several years. He held an umbrella in his hand, but neither of us minded the rain. We left the administration building and headed down the stone path to a spot where the landscape opened up and presented us with an incredible view of the valley ahead.

We approached a flight of concrete stairs that bridged the platforms that lead to the children's homes, framing the vista. I cautiously proceeded down the wet steps, thinking that in return for their adversity in life, these children were gifted with the most serene and tranquil view.



Figure 52: A view of the communal stairs to the lower levels.



Figure 53: The “family houses” framing a view of the mountainside.



Figure 54: A view up the communal stairs bridging the homes.



Figure 55: A vibrant tile detail embedded into the concrete stairs.

Rain continued to fall, dripping down my face and leading my eyes to the concrete steps, accented with vibrant blue tile details that were no larger than my toes. Two boys ran across our path, pausing in front of their home with shy smiles upon their faces.

The stairs ended at a small path that turned to follow the side of the hill, surrounded by verdant grass. I paused to look back up the hill. The bright blue handrails stood out against their surroundings, and the heavy concrete and stone had a familiar softness, appearing light and unsubstantial against the radiant landscape. It was hard to believe that each platform held back the earth it was resting against.

As soon as I stepped into one of the homes, I was greeted by its warmth. A group of young children were gathered around a large dining table, so captivated by their work that they did not notice us enter. I met the mother of the home, who was preparing a meal in the kitchen. She seemed fairly young and carried with her an air of sincerity.

We were in a wide open space that spanned two storeys and was brightly lit by a number of large windows. They drew my attention to a few openings that look into the spaces upstairs. Without disturbing the children, I quietly walked to the living quarters.

There were a number of bedrooms with openings into the double height space. Each room was furnished with bunk beds. I knelt on the parapet, steadying myself before reaching out as far as I could to capture the stoic children in a photograph. Before I brought my camera into focus, one of the boys saw me over his shoulder and jumped to his feet, making funny faces for the camera. The younger ones hesitated but eventually joined their older brothers and sisters. I felt badly for having disrupted their work but couldn't stop smiling as I left the home.

We followed the narrow walkway, passing a number of family houses that quietly sat in the rain. Within each, the story of a diverse family unfolded, sharing only the glimpses of the depth and humanity that could fit through its colourful window frames.

I realized that my preconceived notions of the SOS Children's Village were far off. I was in awe each time we passed a home and saw the children playing with their toys, or on the front veranda reading a book. Perhaps, I had presumed that these children would be unhappy, longing for their childhood homes or desiring to be with their own families. I wondered whether the children's past had helped them empathize with one another, allowing them to find refuge amongst their brothers and sisters. Every time I caught a glimpse of their preoccupied eyes, I felt a sincere happiness radiating from them.



Figure 56 (left): Children gathered around the dining area of their family home.



Figure 57 (right): Children making faces at the camera.



Figure 58 (left): Children reading and playing on the front veranda.

Figure 59 (right): Clothes drying on a rack under the roof canopy.



Figure 60: Stairs built into the landscape to connect the family homes.



Figure 61: The children finding shelter from the heavy rain.

An older sister read to her younger siblings. Two children stood in the rain holding toys, waiting for their neighbouring cousins to arrive. A colourful array of clothing hung drying on a line above their heads. We moved through a changing landscape, slowly descending with the topography of the valley. A series of concrete steps followed the houses, integrated directly into the landscape, connecting us with the lower levels.

After walking through the entire village, my guide pointed into the distance and asked me whether I would like to take a photograph of the village from the hill. I quickly packed my camera and followed him up a narrow gravel road.

The SOS Children's Village almost disappeared into the layers of the hillside. From a distance, it was indistinguishable from the other homes that also hung from the sloped landscape. The vibrant colors were dulled by the downpour, but the window frames, doors and handrails gave it away. As I focused the lens into the sleepy landscape, even from a distance, I felt the incredibly vigorous energy of the children that called it home.



*Figure 62 (above): A view of the SOS
Children's Village from the hillside.*

*Figure 63 (following spread): The fleeting
clouds from the roads, Nuwara Eliya.*

*I grew up in this town, my poetry was born between the hill and the
river, it took its voice from the rain, and like the timber, it steeped
itself in the forests. —Pablo Neruda*

...And once again, we were back on the soggy and windy roads, rolling
uncontrollably down the mountain, swaying side to side—half asleep
and half in the clouds.





Figure 64
122

Notebook V

Bawa Trail

[Interlude]



Figure 65: Southern Expressway
towards Galle, Kalutara.

December 23, 2014

It is impossible to explain architecture in words—architecture cannot be totally explained but must be experienced. —Geoffrey Bawa

I was half awake when I acquainted myself with the group of architects and architecture students that were traveling with me. They had landed in Sri Lanka an hour ago, and we were already speeding down the Katunayake expressway towards Mirrisa. Ananda had cleaned his van of all traces of our previous trip to the mountains. Despite being drowsy, our excitement was still palpable in anticipation of witnessing the architecture of Geoffrey Bawa. My companions had compiled a list of buildings and sites they hoped to visit in their short trip to Sri Lanka, which I had consolidated into a four day long trip. We would start at Mirrisa, the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka, and journey along the west coast on our Bawa trail, back to Colombo.

My head nodded while I desperately attempted to stay awake so that I could make sure Ananda would not fall asleep. He didn't even budge. Neither of us had time to sleep after returning from our trip to Nuwara Eliya the night before. Already the landscape along the highway glowed as sunlight penetrated the clouds. I occasionally caught a glimpse of peacocks in the distance.

Before arriving in Sri Lanka, my knowledge of Geoffrey Bawa had extended to only a number of books about him. I was unaware that Sri Lanka had given rise to such a revered and influential architect. After a month into my travels, I was beginning to learn more about him through his assistants, including Anjalendran, who had become a friend to Bawa towards the end of his life.

I was fascinated by the long and deeply-rooted lineage Bawa had established. One could see that he was devoted to sharing his experience, ingenuity and beliefs with his apprentices—a process that I saw repeated in Anjalendran's instruction of his own students. It occurred to me that this passing of knowledge from master to pupil, which was rare to find elsewhere, had resulted in a lineage that was both unique and meaningful. Bawa was a representation of the lasting change that could be accomplished through architecture, and it was truly a privilege to gain insight from his life's work, and to be among those who would carry on his legacy.

The Jayawardene House

Geoffrey Bawa, 1997

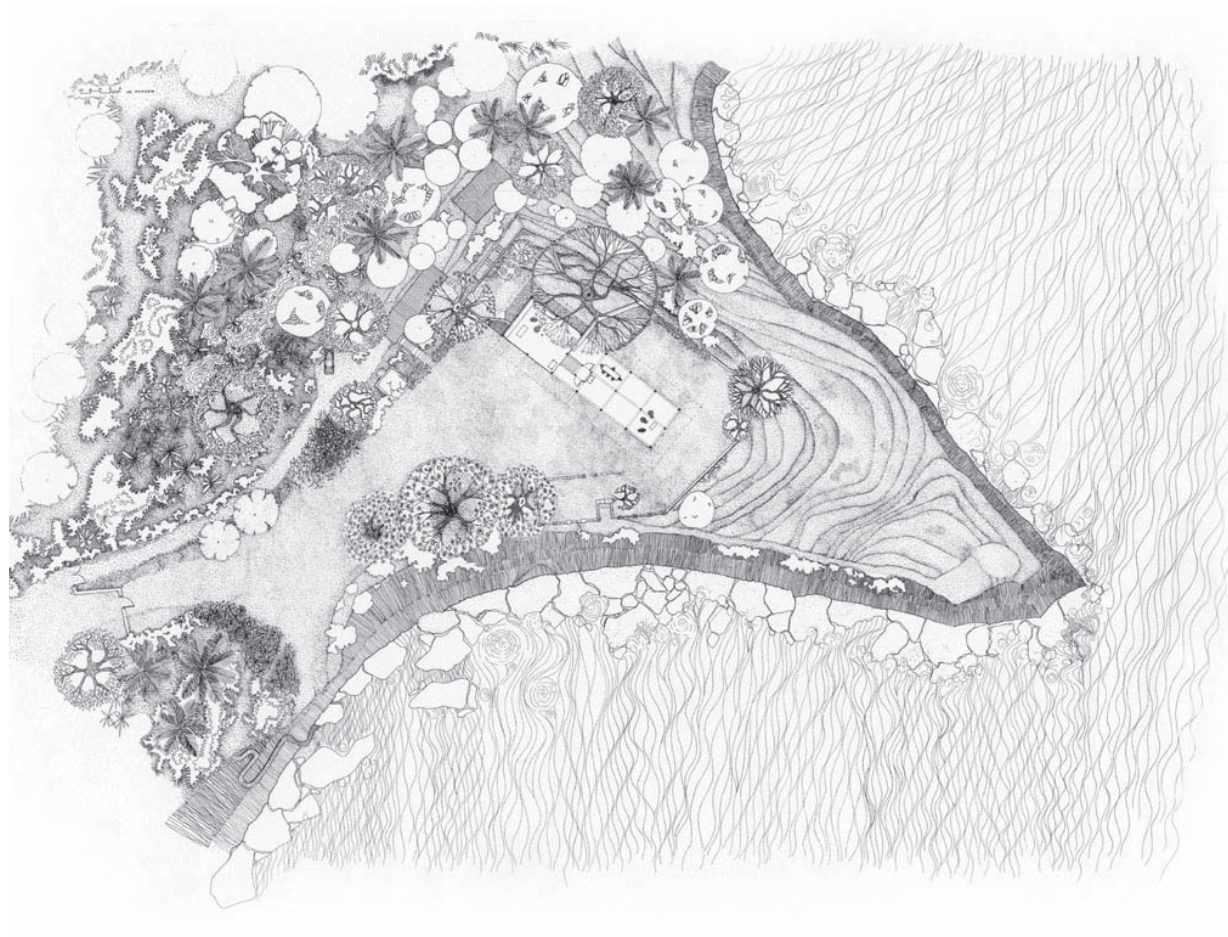
Mirissa, Sri Lanka

Bawa designed the Jayawardene House as a holiday home high on a cliff-top overlooking the eastern end of Weligama Bay. It carries only the bare architectural features of Bawa's well-known monsoon-style house. It is situated among a grove of trees, with concrete columns supporting an over-sailing steel roof. The house is reduced to only its essentials: an open loggia with a raised rear section, which is above the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, and a simple pavilion resting on a stepped plinth facing the sunset.³⁷

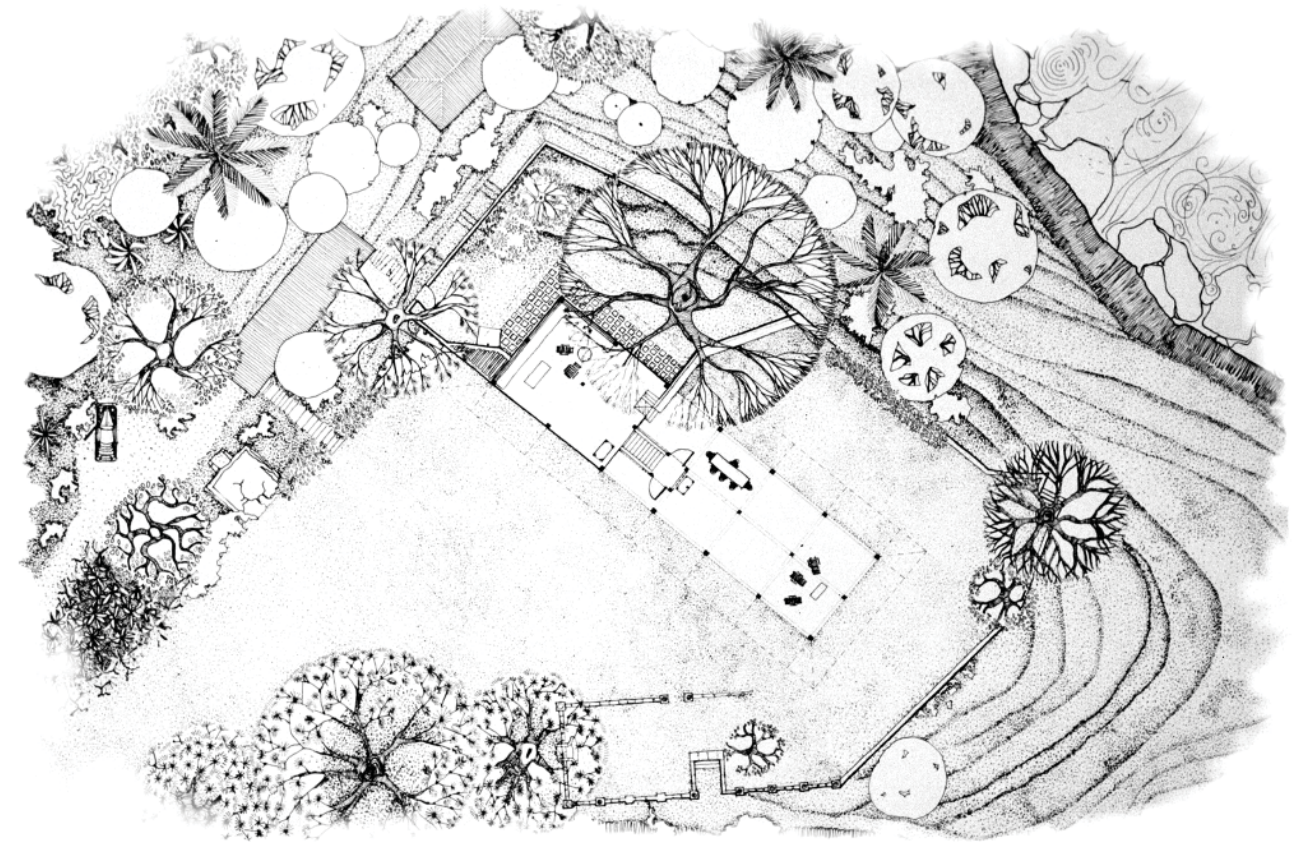


Figure 66 (top): The path turning to reveal the Jayawardene House, Mirrisa.

Figure 67 (bottom): The house, along with the trees, open to the landscape beyond.



*Figure 68: Site plan of the Jayawardene House, Mirissa.
Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.*



*Figure 69: Ground floor plan of the Jayawardene House, Mirissa.
Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.*

The Lighthouse Hotel

Geoffrey Bawa, 1995

Galle, Sri Lanka

The Lighthouse Hotel is situated on a rocky promontory a mile north of the old Arab port of Galle. The main entrance and reception buildings sit on the southern tip of the ridge, and looks out over the inhospitable sea. It confronts the relentless waves, while providing contrast as a place of shelter and tranquillity. The staircase was designed by Laki Senanayake, a friend of Bawa, and is a swirling mass of Dutch and Sinhalese warriors in a reenactment of the battle of Randeniya. Each part of the building is connected to the others, such that the eye is continually invited to explore each subsequent space.³⁸



Figure 70 (top): A sheltered walkway built around the rocky landscape.

Figure 71 (bottom): The outdoor walkways wrapping around the courtyard.



Figure 72: The building showcasing a tree in the rain.

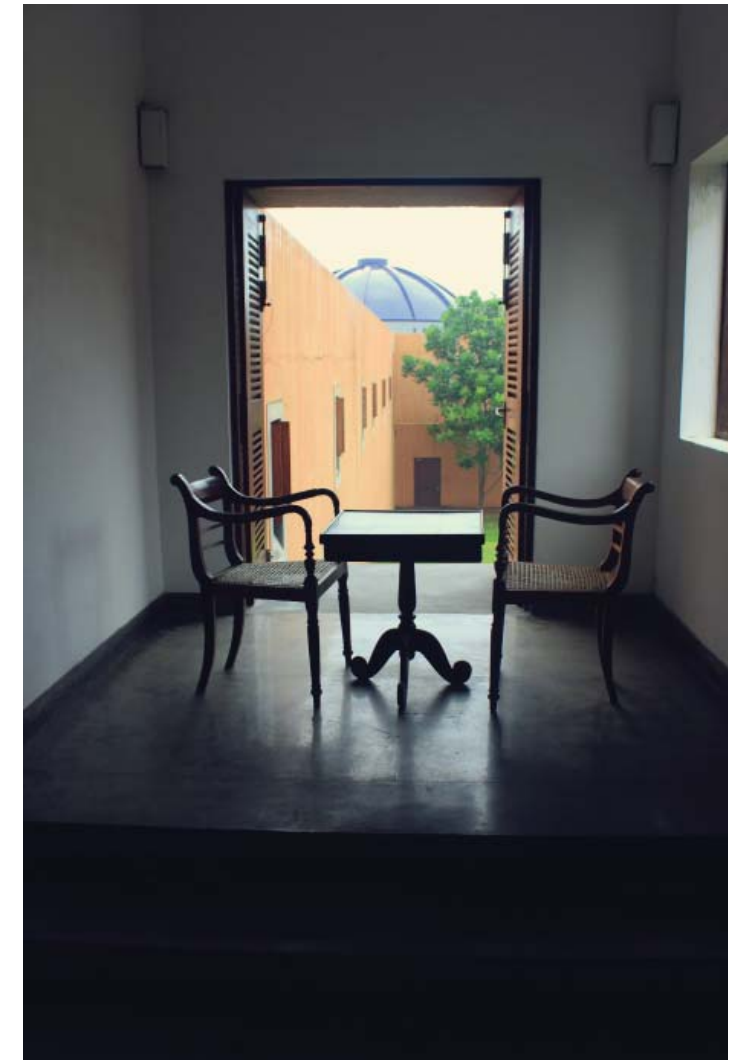


Figure 73 (above): A quaint seating area with a private view onto the courtyard.

Figure 74 (following page): Rainwater falling into the courtyard pond.





Figure 75: The staircase to the lobby, designed by artist Laki Senanayake.



Figure 76: The swirling mass of Dutch and Sinhalese warriors reenacting the battle of Randeniya in 1630.

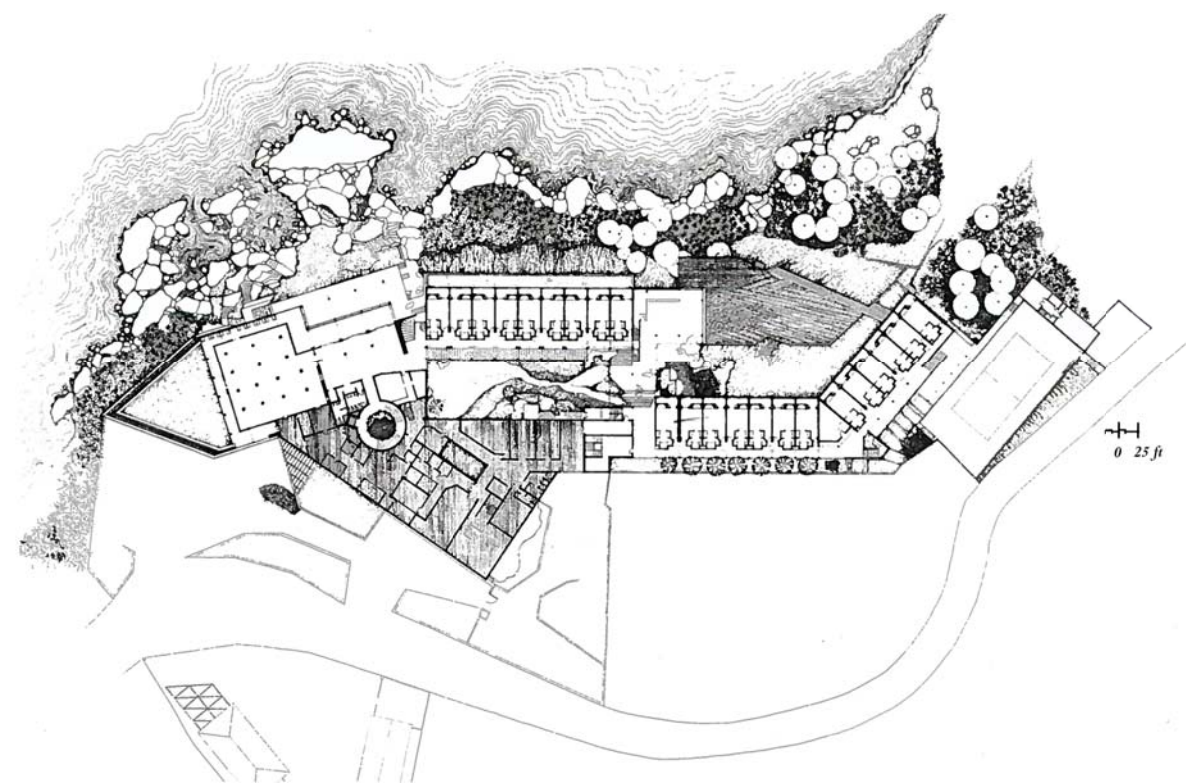
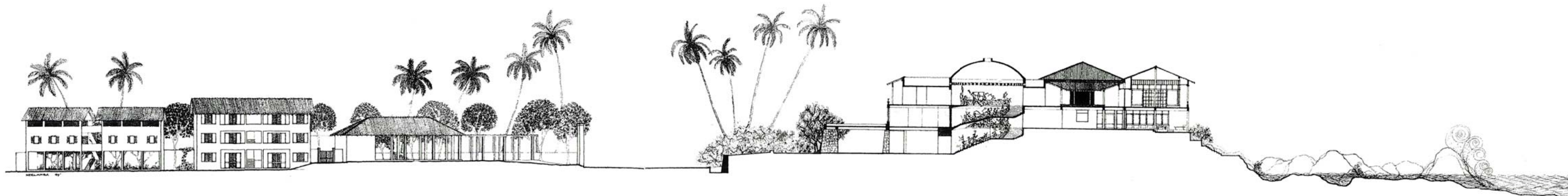


Figure 77 (top): Cross-section through the Lighthouse Hotel from east to west looking south.
 Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.

Figure 78 (above): Plan of the Lighthouse Hotel at the main terrace level.
 Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.

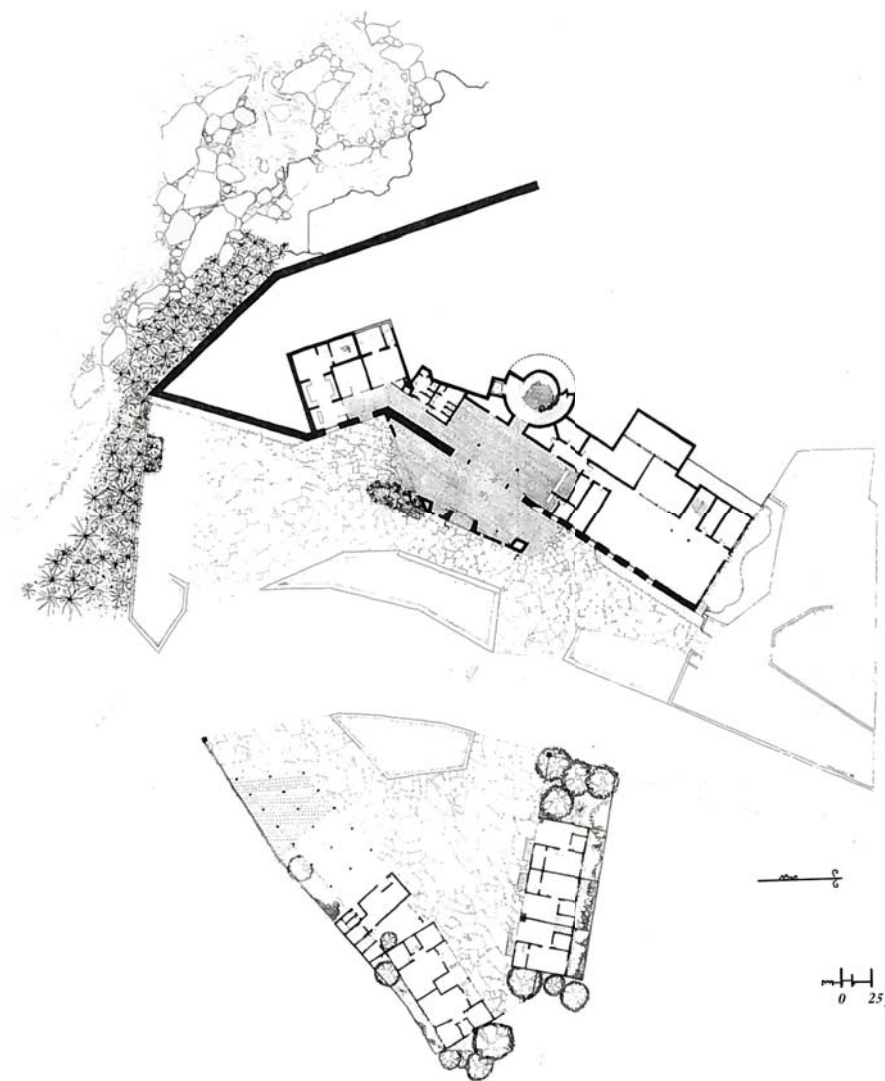


Figure 79 (above): Plan of the Lighthouse Hotel at the entry level.
 Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.

The Triton Hotel
Geoffrey Bawa, 1979
Ahungalla, Sri Lanka

Bawa began planning this hotel by carefully examining the shape of the site. A long, narrow beach touches an equally slender strip of land, which accesses the main Colombo-Galle Road. His strategy was to embody the traditional rest house by designing two long wings that faced the ocean and allowed the site to breathe through the building.

The arrival to the hotel is dramatized with a view of the sea across a reflecting pool, followed by a polished lobby floor and swimming pool area. The Triton Hotel's shape is restrained: a plain elevation advancing and receding under the overhanging eaves. The appearance is simple and uncluttered: a modern seaside retreat with the sights and sounds of the ocean.³⁹

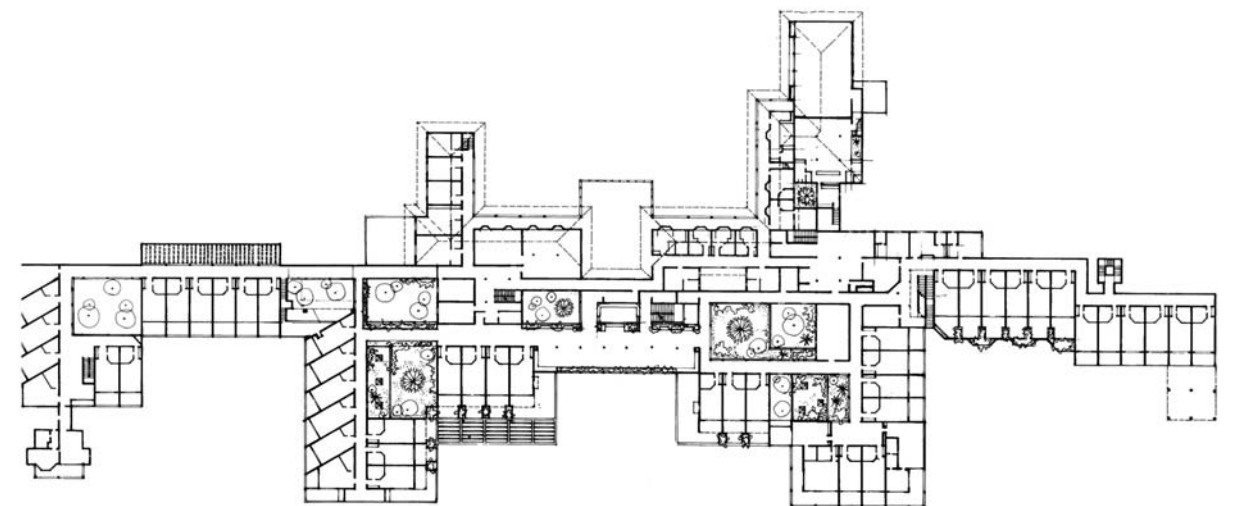
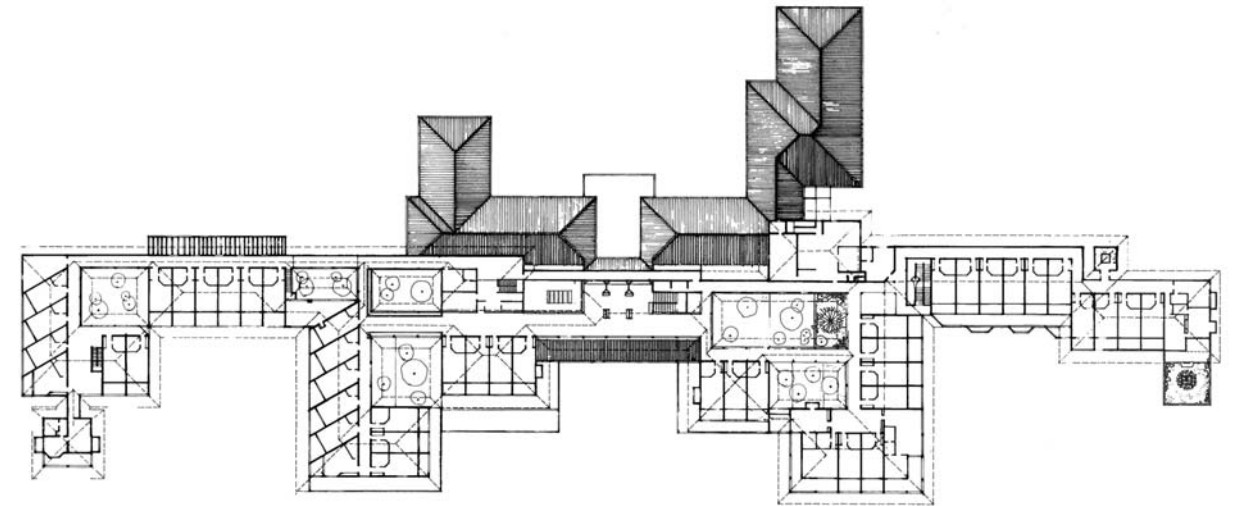
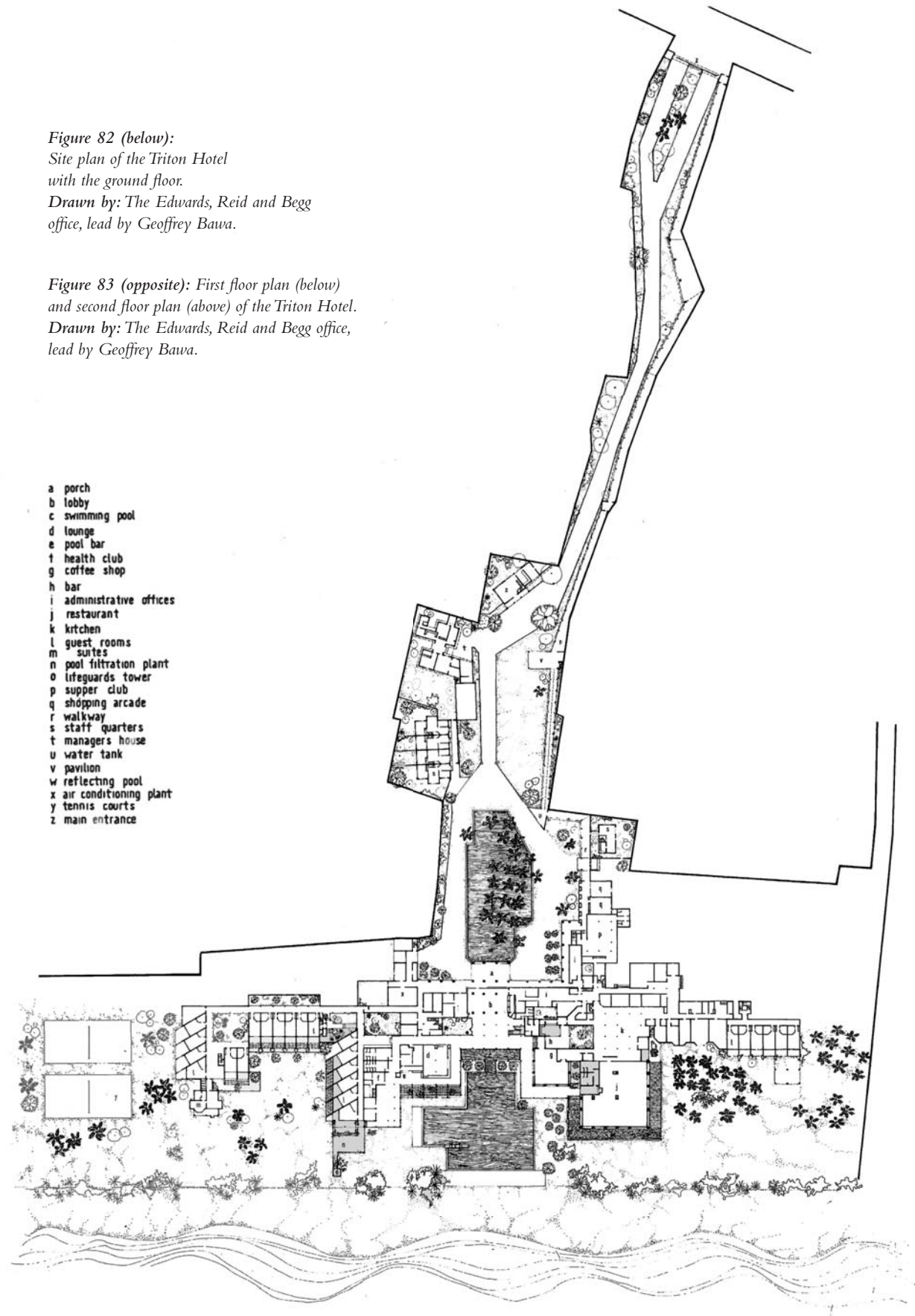


Figure 80 (top): A view through the lobby past the swimming pool towards the beach.

Figure 81 (bottom): A view from the lobby looking back at the entry sequence to the building.

Figure 82 (below):
 Site plan of the Triton Hotel
 with the ground floor.
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg
 office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.

Figure 83 (opposite): First floor plan (below)
 and second floor plan (above) of the Triton Hotel.
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office,
 lead by Geoffrey Bawa.



Club Villa Hotel
Geoffrey Bawa, 1970's
Bentota, Sri Lanka

The Club Villa was originally a beach-side house at Bentota built sometime in 1880, but which fell into ruin. The only remaining aspect of the two-storey structure was a few of the bedrooms. The house was bought in 1979, and saw the addition of a loggia and courtyard, in which a swimming pool was constructed. Later, bedrooms and kitchens were added to the house, which remain to the present day.⁴⁰



*Figure 84: The quaint entry courtyard
of Club Villa Hotel.*

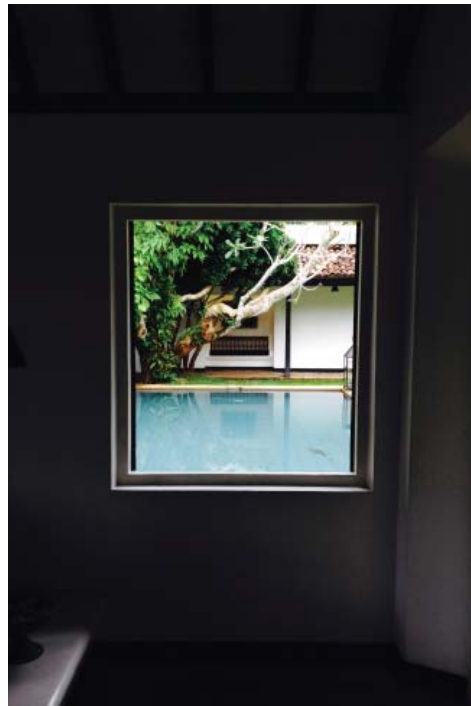


Figure 85 (left): A view from the common space into the courtyard.



Figure 86 (right): A concrete stairway leading to a bedroom suite.



Figure 87 (above): The sheltered exterior spaces wrapping around the courtyard swimming pool.

Figure 88 (following page): The view from the rear garden looking back at the hotel.



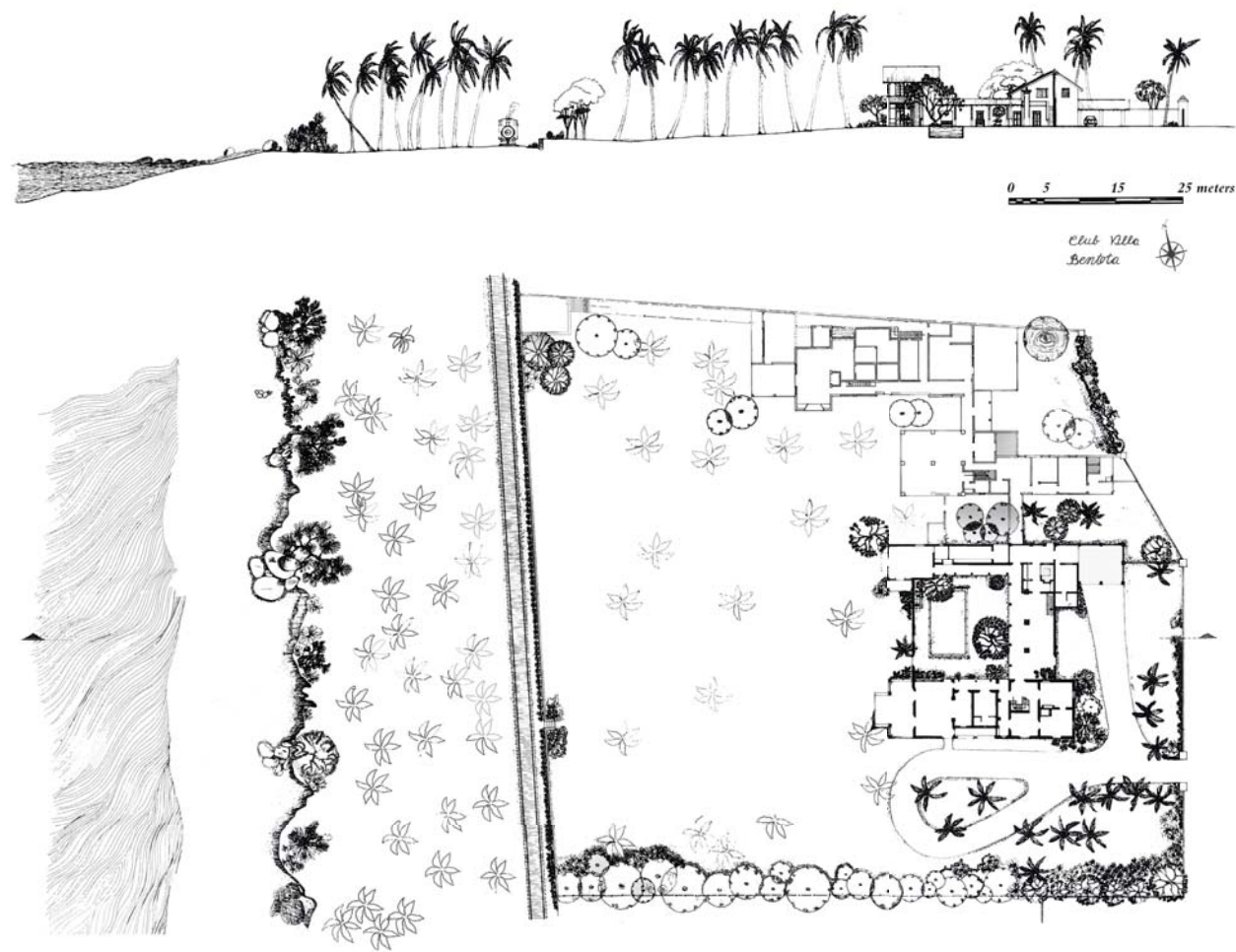


Figure 89: Site plan and section of Club Villa Hotel.
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.

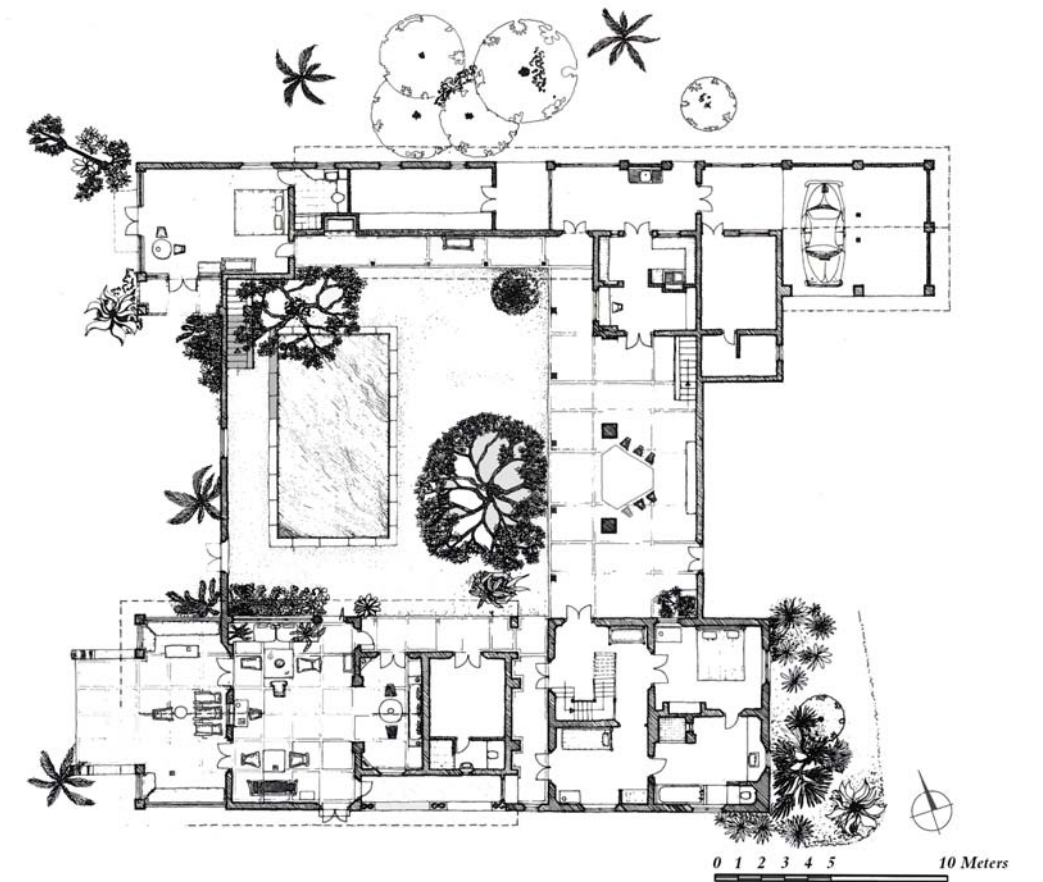


Figure 90: Floor plan of Club Villa Hotel.
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.

Lunuganga Estate
Geoffrey Bawa, 1947
Bentota, Sri Lanka

Lunuganga Estate was the country home of Geoffrey Bawa, which was built in 1947. Bawa continued to use the estate as a starting point for developing his groundbreaking ideas in Sri Lankan architecture. After his passing in 2003, the gardens of the estate are now open to the public, and the buildings on either side have been converted into guest houses.

The estate consists of a house and twenty-five acres of land. There is a low hill planted with fruit trees and coconut palms, all surrounded by the Dedduwa Lake. The feeling of the trees and the changing landscape forms the basis of the garden. Throughout the years, the house has been continually altered, and terraces have been built. It is still an ongoing process.⁴¹



Figure 91 (above): A view through the front gates proper into the entrance court at Lunuganga Estate.

Figure 92 (following page): The Glass Pavilion and guest wing from the back.





Figure 93: Looking east towards the watergate, reminiscent of an Italian villa.



Figure 94: The art gallery & landscape stepping down to the lower boardwalk, paddy field and lagoon.



Figure 95: The boardwalk cutting through the water garden in the distance.



Figure 96: Looking down Cinnamon Hill from the south terrace.



Figure 97: Built-in steps connecting the art gallery (now guest room) to the upper level.



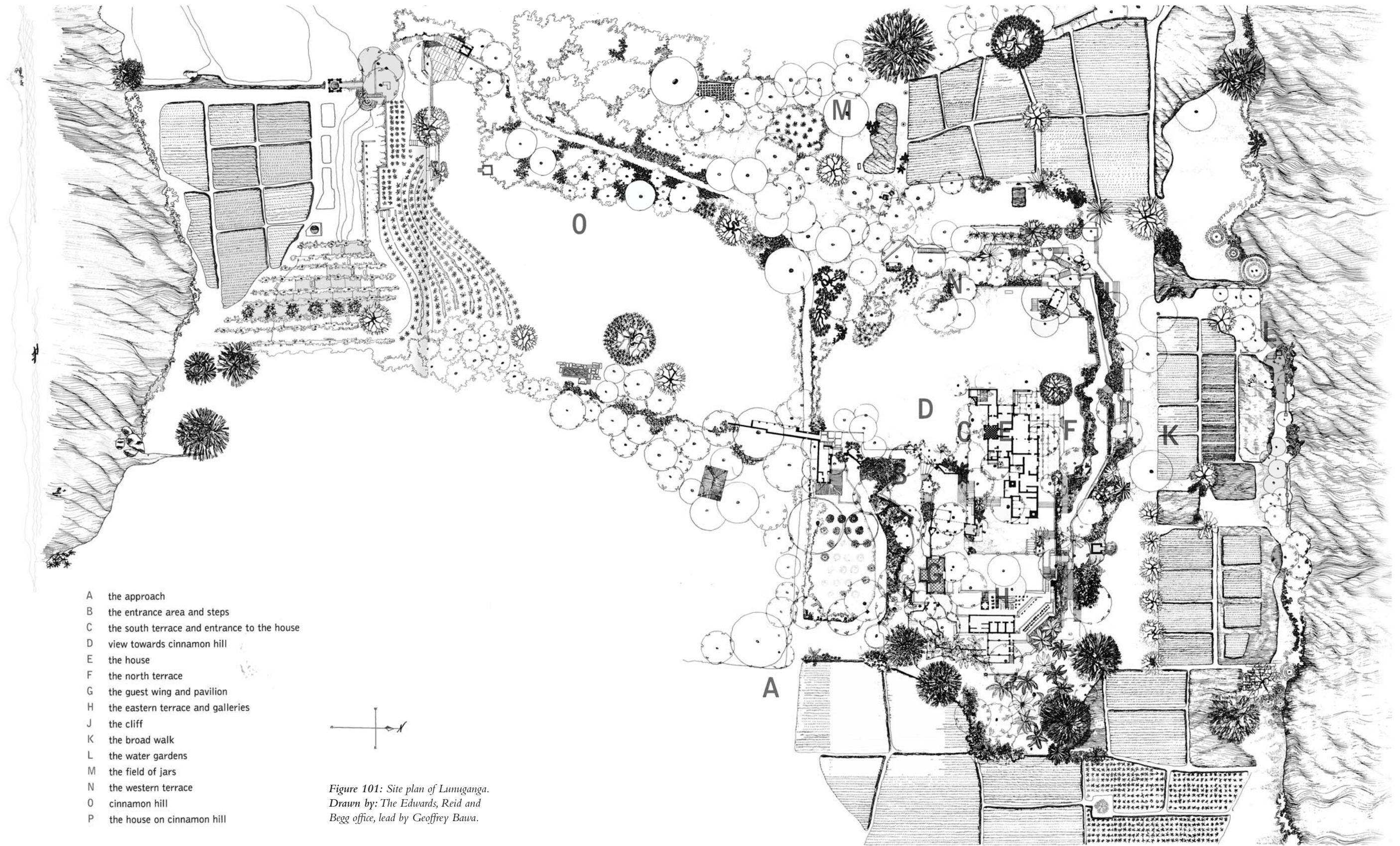
Figure 98: The view from the east terrace toward the hen house and art gallery beyond.



Figure 99: Looking through the raised Glass Pavilion porch towards the Entrance Court.



Figure 100: Seating shelter at the Entrance Court. The Glass Pavilion porch behind.



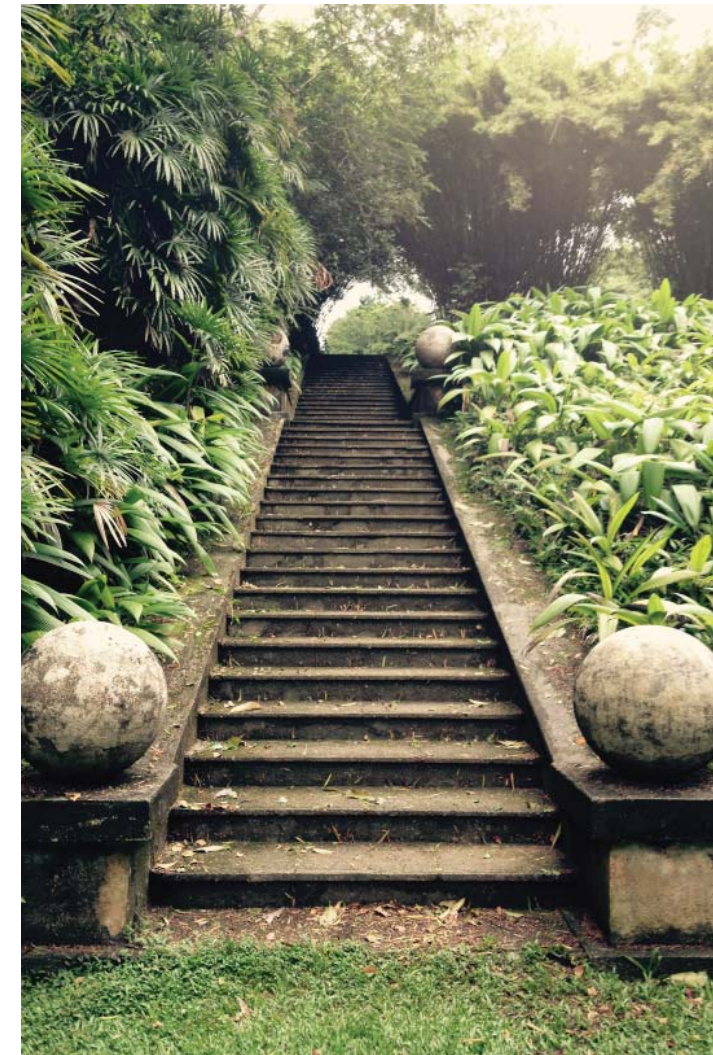
- A the approach
- B the entrance area and steps
- C the south terrace and entrance to the house
- D view towards cinnamon hill
- E the house
- F the north terrace
- G the guest wing and pavilion
- H the eastern terrace and galleries
- J the cliff
- K the broad walk
- L the water gardens
- M the field of jars
- N the western terrace
- O cinnamon hill
- P the house on cinnamon hill



Figure 101: Site plan of Lumuganga.
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and
 Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.

Brief Garden
Bevis Bawa, 1929
Benuwala, Sri Lanka

Brief Garden was conceived by Geoffrey Bawa's brother Bevis over a period of twenty years. The Brief garden was designed in an evolutionary way without a fixed blueprint. It splays outward down the hill on two sides of the bungalow, and was connected by network of overgrown pathways. Having traversed over an area of open paddy fields, the visitor arrives at a pair of wrought-iron gates. These open to an avenue of palms, leading to a dense wall of bamboo. Here, a blank wall opens up through a small door, reminiscent of a scene from a fairy tale, which ascends to the veranda. A second sequence goes down a staircase to a round pool, which is connected with hidden pavilions and bowers.⁴²



*Figure 102: One of the many stairways
throughout Brief Garden.*



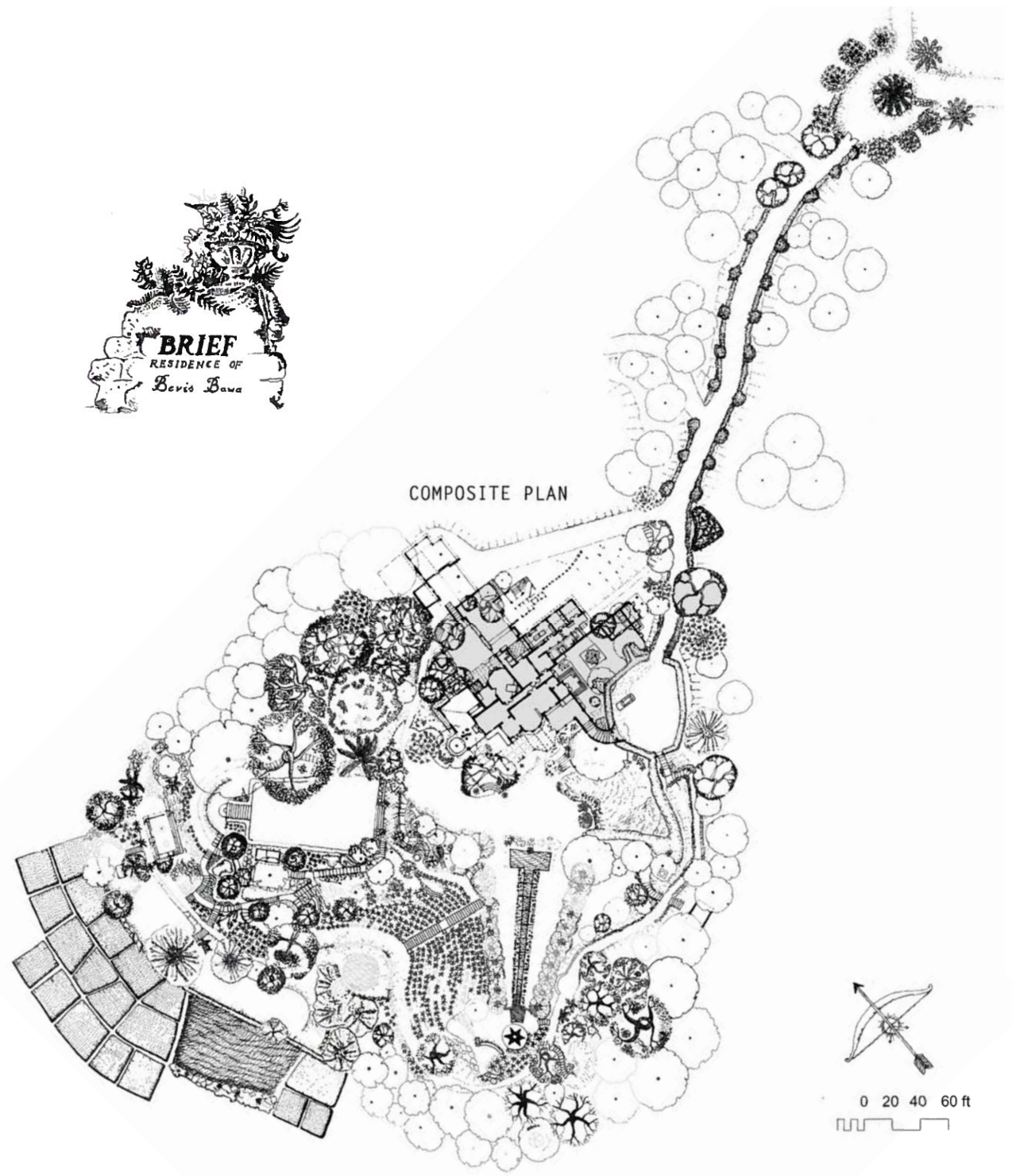
Figure 103 (top): A view towards the estate bungalow at the top of the garden.

Figure 104 (bottom): A seating area along the garden path.

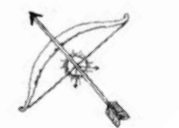


Figure 105 (top): The outdoor patio at the estate bungalow, overlooking the landscape.

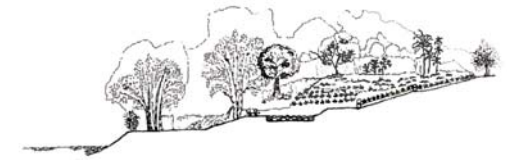
Figure 106 (bottom): A view from inside of the bungalow looking out into the garden.



COMPOSITE PLAN



0 20 40 60 ft



SECTION THROUGH CIRCULAR POND



SECTION THROUGH CASCADE



SECTION THROUGH SQUARE LAWN

0 20 40 60 ft

Figure 107 (opposite): Site plan of Brief Garden.
 Drawn by: Michele, Romesh & Dilshan, 1988,
 redrawn by Ruveka in 2007.

Figure 108 (above): Sections of Brief Garden.
 Drawn by: Michele, Romesh & Dilshan, 1988,
 redrawn by Ruveka in 2007.

33rd Lane
Geoffrey Bawa, 1968
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Between 1958 and 1959, Geoffrey Bawa acquired the third row of four small bungalows in a cul-de-sac at the end of a street that splits off Bagatelle Road. He converted it into a pied-à-terre, with a living room, bedroom, small kitchen, and a servant's room. In 1961, when the fourth bungalow became vacant, this was transformed to serve as a dining room and a second living room. The resulting maze of rooms and garden courts left no room for the distinction of inside or outside. The composition was guided by a complex grid to create the illusion of unlimited space in a limited urban property. Bawa continued to experiment with the house for the next thirty years, using it to test out new ideas. It was here that he began collecting bits of old homes and play around with *bricolage*.⁴³



Figure 109: A view from the carport entry towards the interior.



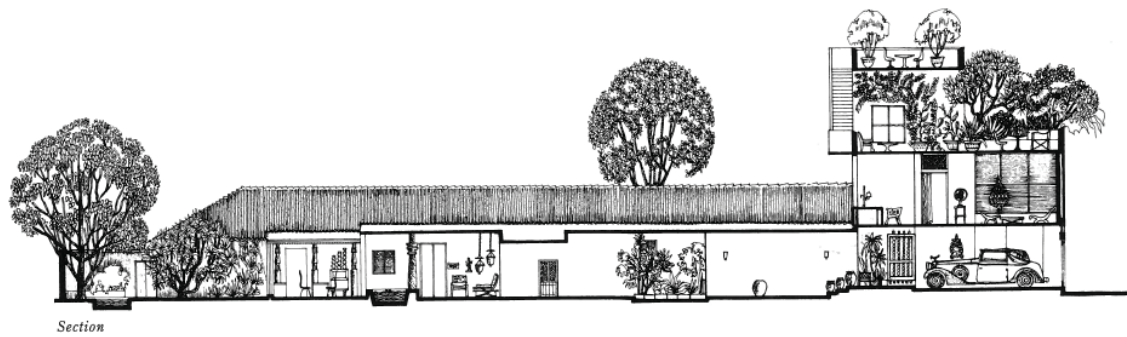
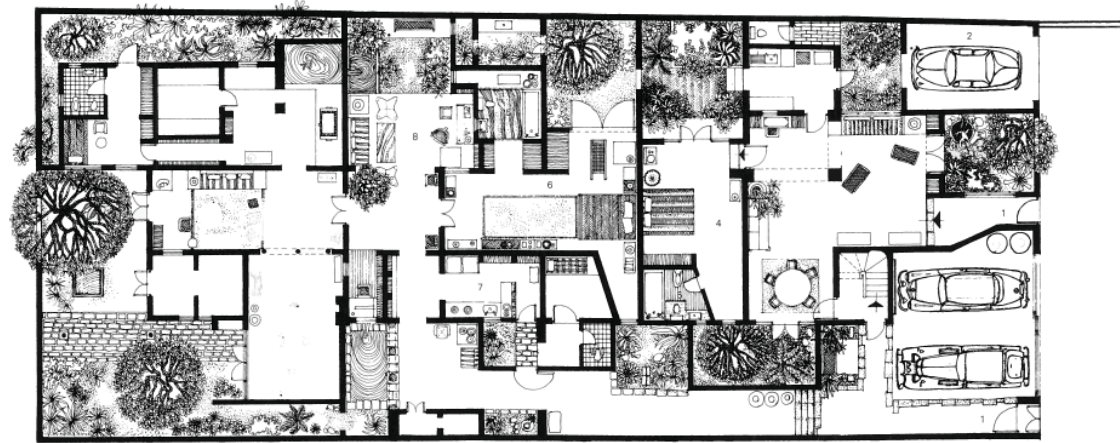
Figure 110 (left): The stairwell leading up to the upper terrace.

Figure 111 (right): A sculpture by Laki Senanayake near the entry corridor.



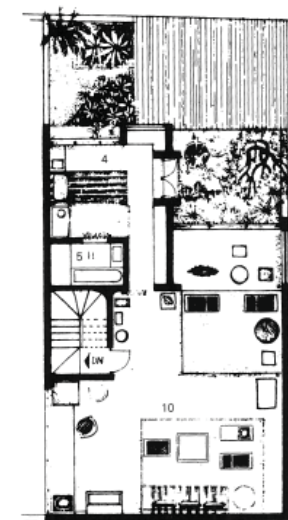
Figure 112 (left): The formal sitting room, which looks out onto the far courtyard.

Figure 113 (right): The dining area, which shares a view into the far courtyard.

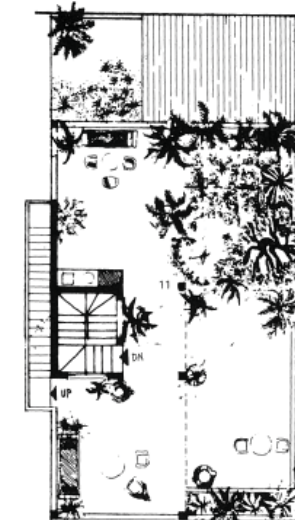


Section

Figure 114: Ground floor plan of 33rd Lane (above) and section (below).
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.



Second floor



Third floor

- 1 ENTRANCE
- 2 GARAGE
- 3 OFFICE
- 4 BEDROOM
- 5 BATHROOM
- 6 MASTER BEDROOM
- 7 KITCHEN
- 8 VERANDAH
- 9 DINING ROOM
- 10 SITTING ROOM
- 11 ROOF TERRACE

Figure 115: Second and third floor plans of 33rd Lane.
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.

Architect's Old Office
(Gallery Cafe)
Geoffrey Bawa
Colombo, Sri Lanka

The Gallery Cafe was at one point in time Geoffrey Bawa's office, but had initially been planned as a doctor's home. However, when the foundations had been built, the client abandoned the idea, and Bawa bought the property for himself. In this way, the kitchen was made into an accounts office, and the three upstairs bedrooms into a main drawing room, sitting between the two courtyards. There was a definitive mood which could be easily felt as one progressed through the house, first through the entrance courtyard to the central court, then through to the great meeting room and finally into the architect's office.⁴⁴



Figure 116 (left): A view from the veranda towards the front courtyard.

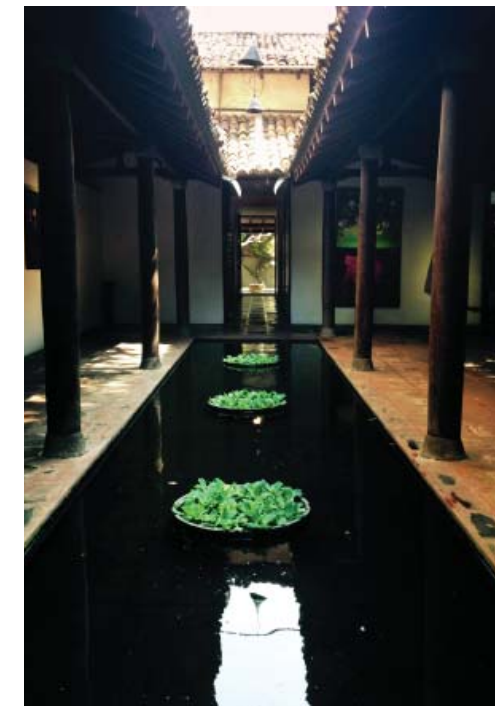


Figure 117 (right): The entrance courtyard and pool leading to the architect's office.

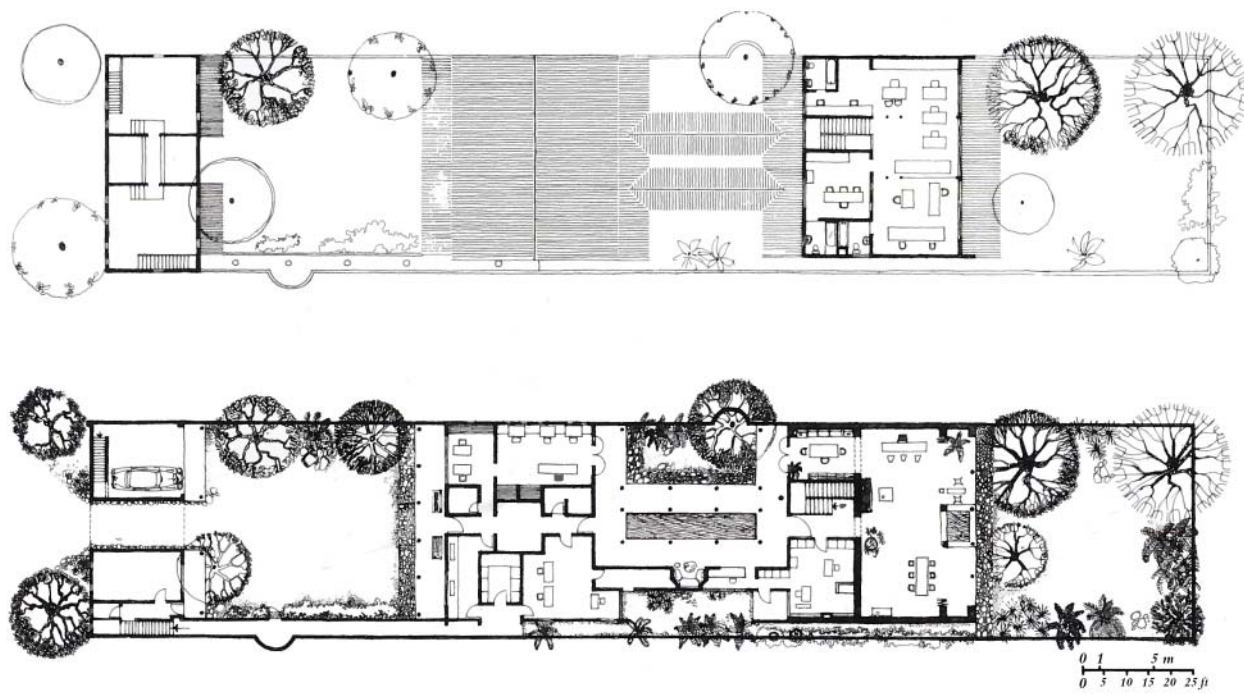


Figure 118: Ground floor plan of Bawa's old office (below) and upper floor plan (above).
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.

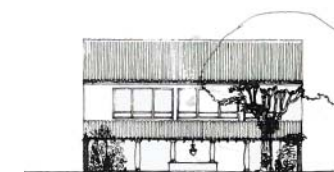
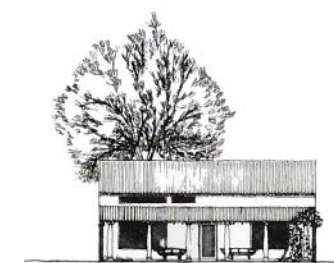


Figure 119: Garden elevation of Bawa's old office (below) and entrance facade to offices (above).
 Drawn by: The Edwards, Reid and Begg office, lead by Geoffrey Bawa.



Figure 120

Notebook VI

Reflecting



Figure 121: Evening sunset
at Negombo beach.

January 07, 2015

One evening, I realized that I had been in Sri Lanka for almost two months and I had not yet visited the beach. In my childhood, we walked there frequently because it was only a ten minute stroll from our property. Of all my childhood memories, these seem to be some of the most vivid. I remember parting with the seashore on late evenings, as the sun set behind us. It was nightfall when we reached our homes and we rushed inside to spill our bags of shells, scattering them over a table and observing our findings. In hindsight, this ritual meant more than a celebration of our findings; the shells were relics with which we remembered those moments.

The walk to the beach was exactly as I remembered it. Although the small street we had once walked along was freshly paved, it felt more like a space for events than one for vehicles. Houses were built right along its edges and people spilled out onto the road. They sat precariously on plastic chairs and children haphazardly clambered all over the street. We walked in the center of the road to try to avoid it all. Occasionally, the high-pitched engine of a rickshaw screamed from behind us and we had to step towards the narrow roadside as it squeezed its way through the mayhem.

The beach showed years of wear and use. We entered through the narrow walkway as we did in my childhood. Garbage was scattered all over the sand, still warm from the afternoon heat. My younger cousins ran around in their bathing suits playing with the sand, reminding me of myself at their age. One of them chased after a crab even though he was terrified of it. As I followed him, I noticed that there was not a single shell in sight. We frequently found pieces of garbage and sea weed but never a shell—the beach had been completely cleared out of these precious relics. I thought about my cousins who were now experiencing the ocean as I had eighteen years ago and I hoped that these precious moments would be preserved in their memory, as they had been in mine. I realized how important memories like this were in shaping me as I grew older, and how they helped make me feel whole, even when the world around me was empty.

I had given up chasing the crabs with my cousin; the sound of the waves captivated me as I neared the water. I thought about how many times the sun had set into the sea and the waves had crashed onto this beach during my eighteen year absence, each time different, each time new, yet always recognizably the same. The sun ignited the ocean with deep shades of orange and red, as we glanced over our shoulders heading towards the road. The waves reminded me that I was barely a mark in the life of the ocean. And as the sound of the waves faded into the distance with the blazing sun, I was comforted knowing that they would continue to crash against the earth long after I left. I convinced myself that even on the other side of the world, if I stood silently and listened, that I would hear the soft *shhhh, shhhh* of each wave.



Figure 122 (above): The coconut trees in the yard swaying to the impending storm.

Figure 123 (following spread): The view out of the veranda of my childhood home. 2:30 p.m.

A Heavy Storm

In the midst of a storm, I am always transported to a childhood memory that has stayed with me my entire life. I remember running deliriously from the front veranda to the back porch. Each time I opened the door and stepped outside, it felt like I was being blown away. The wind smashed the door behind me back and forth. My parents paced through the house, unsure what exactly we would do. They continued to make phone calls to my aunts, uncle and grandparents who lived across the yard.

It was 3 a.m. and we were in the middle of one of the biggest storms I had ever experienced. I stood near the back door of the house, gripping the door tightly, watching the coconut trees thrashing about like drunkards in a wild dance. Three of the trees nearest to me, which we had lashed together for support, threatened to crash onto the house at any moment. I was fixated by their motions and hadn't noticed my parents locking the door behind me, my sister hanging onto them tightly. They both held flashlights and were as serious as I had ever seen them. We huddled together and ran as quickly as we could across the yard, our feet deep in cold water. It felt like the world was spinning around us, and amidst the frenzy, all I could think of was finding shelter. Soaked in rain, we rushed into the protection of my grandparents' home, where we joined the rest of my cousins, aunts and uncles who had arrived before us. We found comfort in each other and were at ease knowing that we were all together. My grandparents' presence brought us a sense of assuredness. They sat calmly with an expression on their face that read "it will pass."

Before preparing for bed, I remember walking to the back room and sitting alone with my grandmother. I had picked up my grandfather's meditation beads and had asked her about them. She called me over to sit on her lap and explained that my grandfather counted them as he meditated. She had sensed the fear in me as the storm continued to assert its force on everything around us. In hopes of putting me at ease, she decided to teach me a prayer that she recited when she was worried or scared. As she chanted it, I felt the storm around us mercifully quieten.

I now know this chant as the Buddha Vandanā and recite it every so often. I have realized that the chant is less about the meaning of the chant itself, and more about the warmth that it brought me when I remembered reciting it with my grandmother.

Iti pi so Bhagava, Araham, Sammāsambuddho, vijjācaranasampanno, sugati, lokavidú, annuttaro purisadammasārathi, satthá, devamanussánam, Buddho, Bhagavá-ti.

Thus indeed, is that Blessed One: He is the Holy One, fully enlightened, endowed with clear vision and conduct, sublime, the knower worlds, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods, and men, enlightened and blessed.⁴⁵



The Home and the Heart

In a world to which we are born foreign, home is both our beacon and landmark. It is both the origin of our journeys and the destination to which we seek to return—a process that can unfold in dreams, through thoughts, and by physical manners. The time we spend away from home plays a fundamental role in understanding our relationship with it. Over time, our memories of home to grow inside of us, to be pondered, dreamt about, and most of all, missed. Distance provides room for the essence of our old home to contribute to our current feelings, and influences our day-to-day lives. All of these factors hinge on the relationships that we have developed with the place and its people at a particular time in our lives.

The aspects we cherish most about home are the things that we do not always take notice of: the people whom we share it with, the warmth they bring to the dinner table, their reassuring presence in times of hardship and uncertainty, and their lifelong habits that linger in the physical spaces of our homes as well as the impalpable realms of our memories. Abraham Maslow writes that, “The great lesson from the true mystics [...] is that the sacred is in the ordinary. That it is to be found in one’s daily life, in one’s neighbours, friends and family, in one’s backyard.”⁴⁶ Home is present with the near and distant voices and presence of family. It is the locus of our emotional being, where we not only rest our bodies but also our mind. If we are unable to connect with the place we call home, our minds will be restless and our relationships with the greater world will dwindle. The trees that slouch to greet us will remain tall and unreachable and the familiar melody our home will be unwelcoming to our ears.

Frank Lloyd Wright said that when he saw architecture that moved him, he heard music in his ears.⁴⁷ The same could be said about our homes. A home that resonates with us opens up to our body and mind and it pervades both with a familiar tune; “both are immersive; music surrounds us, just as architecture.”⁴⁸ The rhythm of our home is constantly attempting to synchronize with our bodily rhythm. It is within the shelter of our homes that we settle into a relaxed state of breathing. Our home breathes with us and embraces us even between heartbeats. A single, wholesome breath inside our home is worth a hundred gasps of air in the outside world. When memories fade and people depart, we are left with our built world, which becomes a relic or artifact of the past. If a home can be likened to a body, then its residents are the mind. Only when both reside in the same space can life exist and flourish—only then does the heart beat.



Figure 124: My cousins before we set off on an adventure through the yard.

January 26, 2015

When a man has thus become calm, he may turn to the outside world. He no longer sees in it the struggle and turmoil of individual being and therefore he has that true peace of mind which is needed for understanding the great laws of the universe and for acting in harmony with them. —Cary F. Baynes

For the first time during my stay in Sri Lanka, I had a week without any plans. One afternoon, while sitting on the front veranda, I realized how anxious I was thinking about the past two months and the remainder of my time in Sri Lanka. Each day was packed with activity, whether it was daily excursions with family or long bus rides to architectural sites that Anjalendran had suggested. I realized that I had let go of all hesitation in anything I did. I thought about the long, crowded bus rides, the bewildering markets filled with sounds, and the journeys to the highest peaks through sweat, dust, and rain. I had not yet taken a moment to think and reflect.

These thoughts were entering me now, as I sat on my grandfather's planter's chair and refused to leave my mind. Was there a greater meaning behind it all? Was I any closer to defining what my thesis was about? What had each journey meant? Where do I go from here?

The sounds from the yard faded as I wrestled with my thoughts. A few hours later, I noticed the sound of two birds quarrelling over the bird feeder, which reminded me of something my grandfather had pointed out to me a week ago.



Figure 125: My grandfather watching the rain from the front veranda. 5:40 p.m.

I had been drinking tea with my grandfather on the veranda when, after weeks of silence, he lifted his heavy arm and pointed into the distance. "That plant," he said, turning to face me. "That plant. Someone should cut that plant, it's growing too big." He held his arm in front of him as if he had forgotten about it. After such a long period of silence, this spontaneous comment almost made me burst out in laughter.

My grandfather was an avid gardener. He had been a census and statistics representative for the government when I was a child, but he spent most of his time in the garden. He awoke with the sun and swept the entire property. Once he had finished, not a single leaf was left on the white sand and only the precise herringbone pattern from his broom remained.

The home that my grandparents had lived in when I was a child was surrounded by the most magnificent array of flowers. They were all planted neatly along the exterior and trimmed frequently. My grandfather leaned back into his chair and fell back into silence. As he stared into the distance, it seemed to me as though he had once again retreated to the comfort of old memories nestled deep in his mind.

As I studied the plants he had pointed to, I realized how poorly kept the yard really was. No one had the time to maintain it, and with the monsoon rain, it had grown untamed. The sandy driveway that I had walked down countless times as a child now looked like a mere footpath, so heavy and thick was the grass that encroached from either side.

I made my way through waist-high plants back to a storage room near my childhood home, and dragged all the equipment out to the front gate. I then stretched a roll of string along the driveway as a guide and began cutting away the grass on one side, digging deep into the sand to remove the roots. The hours flew by, and I had not worked through even a quarter of the way as the sun slowly retreated.

January 27, 2015

On several occasions, I visited the site where my uncle was building a new home for his family. It was less than a ten minute drive from where we lived in Negombo. Despite the lack of trained construction workers, machinery or any form of safety regulations, the house seemed to be on its way.

I had walked into the site late one afternoon, to find two of the workers fast asleep on a concrete beam no wider than a foot, suspended four meters above the ground. Only two of the men had prior experience, and as for the others, my uncle's home was their first attempt at construction. They came from all over Sri Lanka, and had been staying at the old, pre-existing house on the site, often for weeks at a time. Some of them, upon receiving their pay, left during the holidays and never returned.

January 28, 2015

Meeting Gamini:

I developed a close relationship with one of the contract workers, who had been hired at my uncle's construction site—a middle-aged man named Gamini. My uncle had mentioned that Gamini was trustworthy and hard-working. However, it was also apparent that Gamini was very naive, an aspect that was frequently taken advantage of by his friends and family.

Every so often, he arrived at our property to help with yard work. Early one morning, I looked outside my window and saw Gamini twenty feet above the ground, trimming a mango tree. He was gripping a branch with one hand and wielding a machete with the other. With each swing of his arm, a flurry of leaves and branches cascaded noisily to the ground below.

One morning I found Gamini sitting quietly under a coconut tree. I asked him what his plans were for the day and he shook his head. Gamini said very little, but I always had the impression that he understood everything. I walked with him to the front gate, and asked him whether he would like to help me with the yard work. He nodded, walked away, and soon returned with a shovel.

Gamini and I spend the entire week working through the property, with my family joining us in the evenings after work. As the sun set, we collected all of the waste and trimmings into large piles and lit them on fire—a ceremonious end to a day of hard work. The pyres lit up large portions of the property and the smoke repelled the mosquitoes. The smell of smoke completely permeated my clothes, hair, and skin.

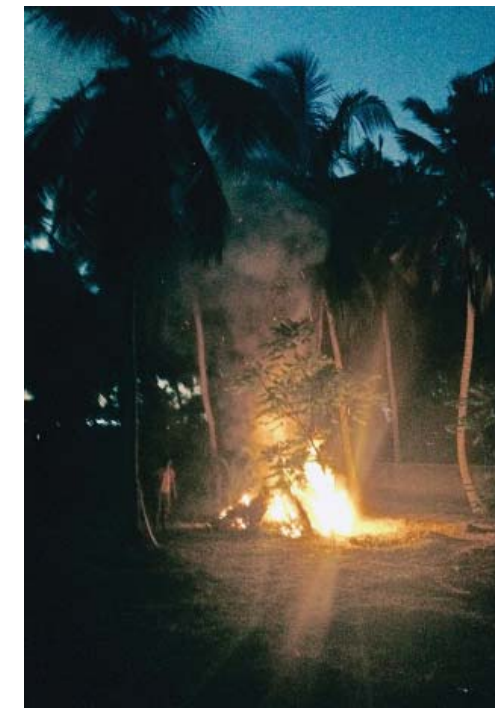


Figure 126 (left): Gamini hanging from the mango tree, from my bedroom window. 8:10 a.m.

Figure 127 (right): My cousin throwing dried shrubbery into the garden pyre. 6:30 p.m.

January 30, 2015

Meeting Mrs. Hevawasan:

“Kanishka, Kanishka!” cried Mrs. Hevawasan. “Can you open this door?”

A small boy ran over with a set of keys and pried open the lock on the door, then quickly ran off. I poked my head into one of the three small houses that were located in the back of the large property.

I had driven up and down Diwlapitiya Road for an hour, searching for the Prasanna Children’s Orphanage. Not knowing the address complicated matters, but I managed to acquaint myself with all of the store owners and residents along that stretch of road as I stopped for directions. I eventually ended up in front of a tailor shop whose owner happened to be Mrs. Hevawasan’s son.

I followed him towards a house directly behind his store, where I then waited. Mrs. Hevawasan came outside and greeted me with a warm smile. We talked for a few minutes before she led me across the street to the orphanage, which I had not noticed earlier.

Having visited the SOS Children’s Villages in Nuwara Eliya earlier in my trip, I had a desire to visit a local orphanage. Mrs. Hevawasan had conceived of the Prasanna Children’s Orphanage twenty years ago after relocating to this part of the country. We were meeting for the first time and I mentioned that my family lived nearby. As we entered a large green landscape with a number of small buildings, she mentioned the resistance that she had faced from the community when she first arrived. It had taken a number of years for the locals to warm up to her and the idea of an orphanage in the neighbourhood. After years of dedication to the children, she was able to convince the community that there was a need for orphanages and that she needed their support to continue her work.

She showed me around one of the three small houses, where the children slept. Each house was divided into smaller bedrooms. Above each bed hung a mosquito net, which had been neatly wrapped away in the morning. A bureau sat in front of each bed holding a stack of school books. As we walked towards the front of the property where the classrooms were located, Mrs. Hevawasan mentioned that one of their greatest investments was paying the teachers to stay overnight to watch over the children. The majority of the children were too young to sleep on their own, even with each other’s company. She elaborated on the financial strain that was brought about by having to hire three teachers to stay overnight on a regular basis.

After having seen the family house model at the SOS Children’s Village, I thought about a similar strategy, which the Prasanna Orphanage could have greatly benefited from. The three small houses could have been joined with a communal space, one that could be overlooked by a single caretaker.

There was an open field in between the three sleeping quarters and the classroom spaces. We proceeded through the well-kept lawn and I noticed that there were clothes resting along every surface in sight. There was only the sound of dried leaves being swept in the distance. I asked Mrs. Hevawasan whether the boys washed their own clothes. She smiled and said, “Yes, we encourage them to wash their own clothes even though we own a small washing machine.” She paused and laughed. Although Mrs. Hevawasan must have been in her sixties, she displayed a youthful exuberance. “Once the children head off to school, we take all of their clothes without them knowing and run them through the washing machine to ensure they are clean.”

Mrs. Hevawasan explained that she teaches the children basic life skills in the hope that they will be better prepared for life when they grow older. Her biggest fear was that if the children were not taught to be familiar with life skills, that they would resort to other means of supporting themselves once they left the orphanage. She spoke of the drugs, alcohol and theft that some of these children had the unfortunate circumstance of witnessing—often from their parents—which was why some of them came to stay at the orphanage..

Mrs. Hevawasan spoke softly, but with an air of authority. Her demeanour was one of kindness and patience, but there also seemed to be a trace of sadness in her eyes. It warmed my heart to hear her anecdotes from the place; they said a lot about her commitment to the orphanage and her children. She was not only offering them a home and a family, but also helping to build their morals and values.

The familiar sound of leaves being swept grew louder as we neared the classrooms. We approached a small boy who swept the ground furiously. “Not many leaves today, but come next month we are going to have lots more,” Mrs. Hevawasan said to him. The boy paused to look at us for a second before returning to sweeping. “Where’s grandma, Suresh?” she asked. “Where’s grandma?”

“In the kitchen,” Suresh replied, not missing a stroke with his wooden broom made of straw bristles. We walked towards the back of the narrow building towards the kitchen.

“The children eat all of their meals together,” Mrs. Hevawasan said. “They walk to school together in the morning and often come back together. Although, some students arrive late because of after-school activities.”

I stood near the door as Mrs. Hevawasan exchanged words with an elderly woman that reminded me of my *aachi*, or paternal grandmother. She was sitting on a tiny bench, clenching a knife between her toes, driving vegetables into the face-up blade as she spoke.

We then continued towards the front of the orphanage. “Suresh! Suresh! Suresh...” beckoned Mrs. Hevawasan, and the little boy came running to us. She asked him in a somewhat sad tone, “Isn’t anyone helping grandma today? Who’s here today?” The boy quietly mumbled a few names and ran off. Mrs. Hevawasan mentioned that she typically hired two cooks, and the boys lent a hand if one of them was unavailable.

We continued to walk and ran into another boy, who was heading home from school. She asked him if he had a lot of homework. He quietly replied, “Imgrisi (English), Sinhala (Sinhalese), Vidyava (Science), Citra (Art).”

“Can you tell someone who doesn’t have homework to come over?” The boy ran off. “But someone older, okay?” Mrs. Hevawasan shouted after him.

We arrived at an outdoor walkway along another narrow building, which housed the offices. Mrs. Hevawasan pointed to a second portion of the building, which was the Montessori school. The two structures formed an L-shape, and created a courtyard in between. She mentioned that they were in the process of cleaning and painting all of the buildings that were in poor condition.

I shared my recent discovery of the Montessori school in my grandparent’s old home. I talked about the children that I saw glimpses of through the coconut trees, and how hearing them had sparked an interest in me for me for the place I knew so well as a child. I told her that I hadn’t visited my grandparents’ home in years, and that it looked like it desperately needed a fresh coat of paint.

Mrs. Hevawasan mentioned the store where she purchased paint for the orphanage. I told her that I would pick up additional paint for the orphanage when I purchased the paint for my grandparent’s old home. She seemed surprised and didn’t respond. I asked her how many litres she would need to re-paint the buildings in the orphanage. “We don’t need to paint everything,” she said, pointing to a building in the distance. “Those were painted recently.” Each building was painted two thirds of the way up with a bright, warm color and the rest was painted white. She avoided changing the colors because that would have required additional paint. I asked her again how many litres she would need. “Four litres for these two,” she replied hesitantly as she pointed to two buildings. “And two litres for this one.”

When I asked Mrs. Hevawasan if I could return later in the week when the children were home from school, she seemed delighted. I mentioned that I was hoping to spend time photographing and sketching the daily activities of the children at the orphanage. As I continued, I noticed an increased awareness in Mrs. Hevawasan. She said, “The problem is, we are told not to allow photographs anymore.” Then after a pause, she added, “There is a new commissioner and he has stopped allowing permission for anyone to take photographs of the children.” Apparently, fraudulent websites had been using such photographs to pose as charities and elicit donations. Mrs. Hevawasan seemed distressed about the issue, so I agreed to not take any photographs.

Mrs. Hevawasan stood up from her chair and asked me whether I wanted tea. I said that I was fine, but she nonetheless turned the corner and asked one of the children to prepare some. “He really likes making tea with grandma whenever we have visitors,” she said. We continued to talk and the boy came back carefully holding a tray with two cups of tea. I made sure to thank him as I picked up my cup.

February 03, 2015

I arrived in Anuradhapura with my grandmother and a bus full of her family and friends from my father's town. They were on a pilgrimage to the many historic Buddhist sites of Anuradhapura. Once we arrived, I told them that I would meet them shortly and caught a rickshaw to the SOS Children's Village in town.

The rickshaw driver seemed to know exactly what I was talking about when I mentioned the Sinhalese word for orphanage. I had been in touch with two other SOS Children's villages through email, one of which was in Galle and the other in Anuradhapura. In my earlier visit to the Children's Village in Nuwara Eliya, I realized that I hadn't brought anything to give to the children, who were always incredibly excited to see me. This time, I called and asked each of the Villages what the children needed: books, clothing, toys? Their response was that the children had received most of these items from other donations. So I asked them for details including the number of children in each village and their approximate ages. I realized that the children were probably tired of receiving school supplies and other mundane things. And so after spending an evening in Negombo, I decided to purchase an assortment of candy—bags and bags of it.

SOS Children's Village
Anuradhapura 1993-1996
Designed by Anjalendran

The children's village in Anuradhapura was the first of Anjalendran's projects to be located in Sri Lanka's dry zone. The site was located on the grid of broad avenues which make up the New Town area of Anuradhapura. Generally a flat rectangle, it was cut diagonally across its south-eastern corner by the bed of an occasional stream.

Anjalendran used the same components and design strategies that he had developed for the earlier projects and placed the Children's Village on the main flat area of the site to the west of the stream bed. The principal access is from the Northern boundary where a paved court leads to an entrance loggia which contained the administrative offices. Beyond this, a cluster of four standard houses lines a transition space which links to a main "village green" formed by a larger group of ten houses. The main court terminates in the community house which contained accommodation for the nurses and "aunts." A bridge connects across the stream to a social centre with kindergarten and a small training workshop. The striking collection of children's toys furniture was made at Ena De Silva's Aluvihare workshop. A hostel for boys was located on a strip of land to the west of the main site across a small road.⁴⁹



Figure 128: A view through the entrance veranda towards the village, Anuradhapura.



Figure 129: "Family houses," on either side of the promenade, each with its own mango tree.



Figure 130 (left): A typical “family house” interior with the bathrooms at the far end.

Figure 131 (right): Roof structure holding clay roof tiles. Colours chosen by Barbara Sansoni.



Figure 132 (left): The community house veranda at the far end of the village.

Figure 133 (right): A window looking onto the entrance veranda from the administration offices.



Figure 134: The sheltered hallways adjacent to the kindergarten courtyard.

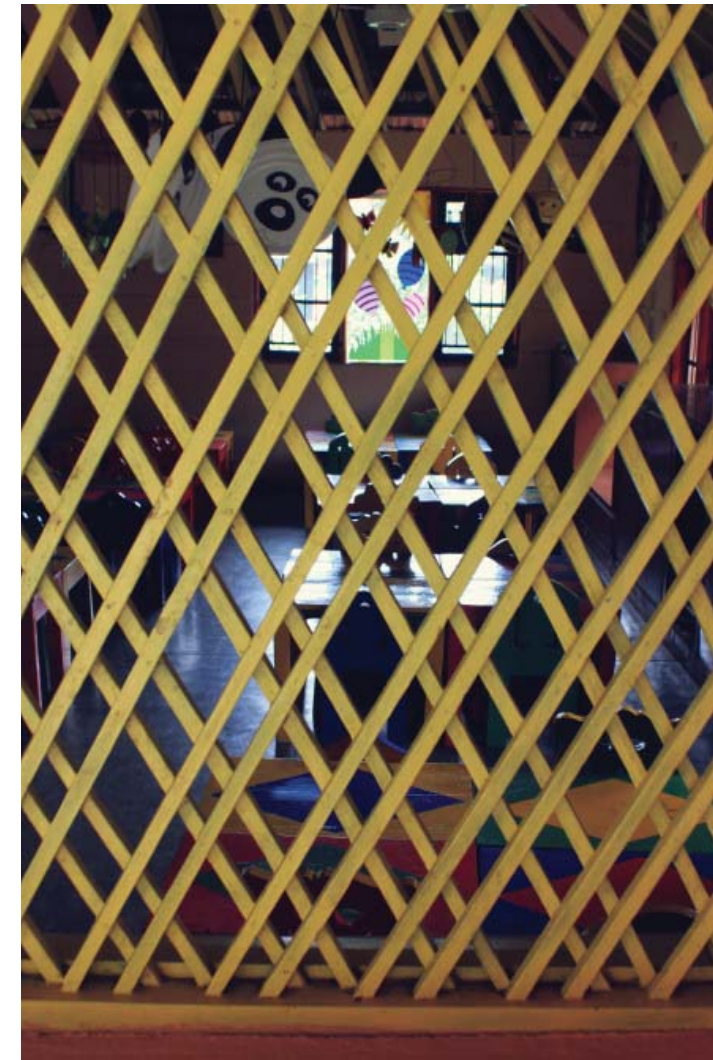


Figure 135: A view through a wooden lattice window into the kindergarten classrooms.



Figure 136: The kindergarten courtyard and children's play area.

SOS Children's Village

Galle, 1987-1994

Designed by Anjalendran

The Children's village is located in the north-western outskirts of the town beside the Wakwella Road. The site is "L"-shaped and has an area of 1.6 hectares. One third of it, the part adjacent to the road, is flat, while the remainder occupies the lower slopes of a wooded hill.

Anjalendran's strategy was to place the village on the sloping ground at the back of the site, to build the reception and administration in the courtyard building beside the road and to leave a large flat playing field as a buffer zone at the centre. The heel of the site is occupied by the school which overlooks the playing field and connects the various elements. Traditional "ambalama" or shelters are placed at strategic points along the main route and act as meeting places. The arrangement produces a strong sense of promenade with anticipatory visual connections.

The visitor progresses from the entrance gates and the car park through the reception building and along an avenue of Plumeria trees which crosses the playing field and then up a flight of steps to reach the forecourt of the school.

The village itself is hidden in trees. A dozen houses for ancillary staff are interspersed with the buildings in a double stranded necklace around the curving hillside. The houses are placed with careful casualness amongst the rocky outcrops and boulders which lay strewn across the site in such a way as to create interesting spaces and narrow winding paths.⁵⁰



Figure 137: A view through the entrance pavilion towards the central Plumeria Avenue, Galle.



Figure 138: A view of the distant Plumeria Avenue and open area leading to the "family houses" on the right.



Figure 139: The “village street” between family houses, ending at an “ambalama” or shelter.



Figure 140: The front veranda of a two-storey community dining space.



Figure 141: A typical “family house” dining area. Staircase leading up to the bedrooms.



Figure 142: Vibrant tile details embedded into concrete staircase.



Figure 143 (left): A view from a double storey building towards the village street.

Figure 144 (right): An alleyway between two family houses accommodating an outdoor cooking area.



Figure 145: The "ambalama" and Plumeria Avenue towards the entry pavilion.

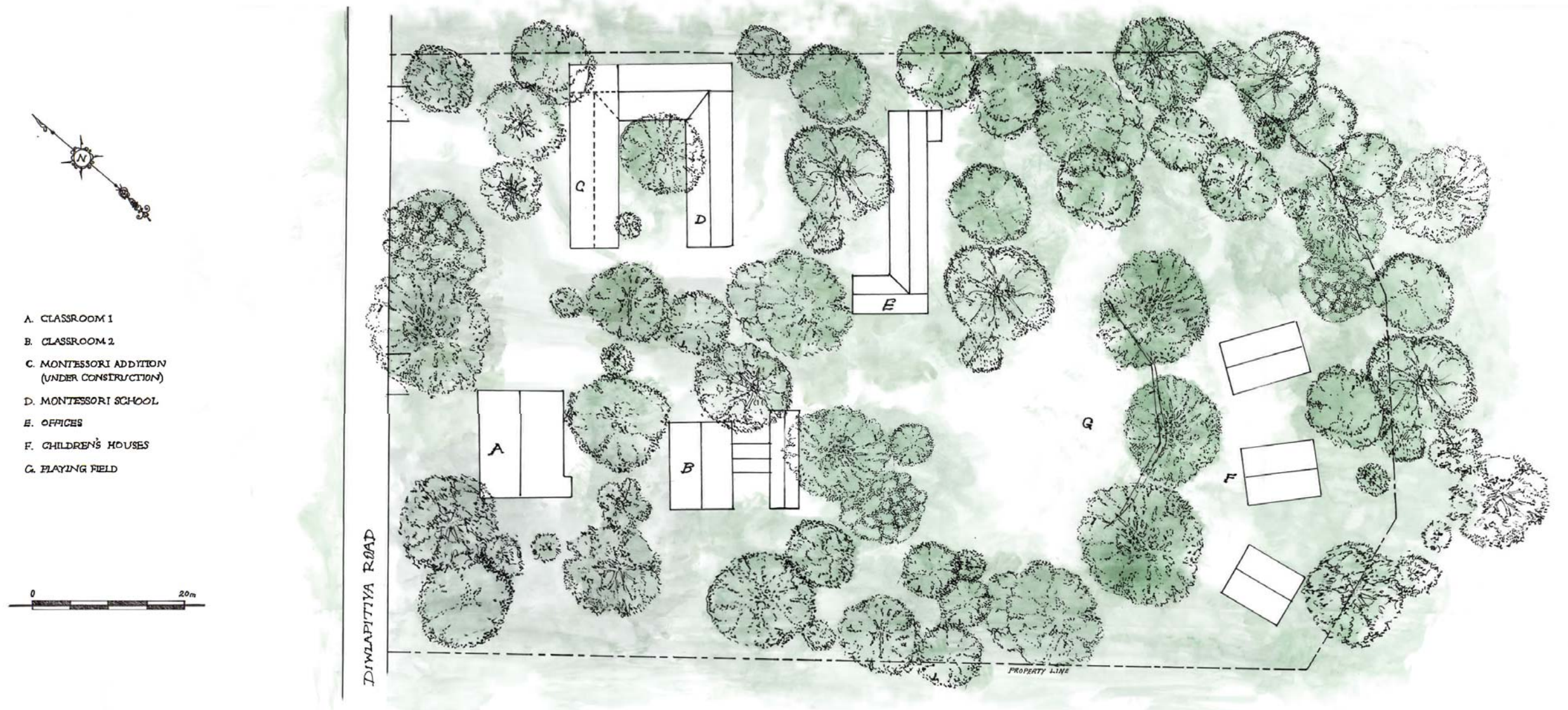


Figure 146: Sketched site plan of the Prasanna Children's Orphanage, Negombo. Drawn by: Author.

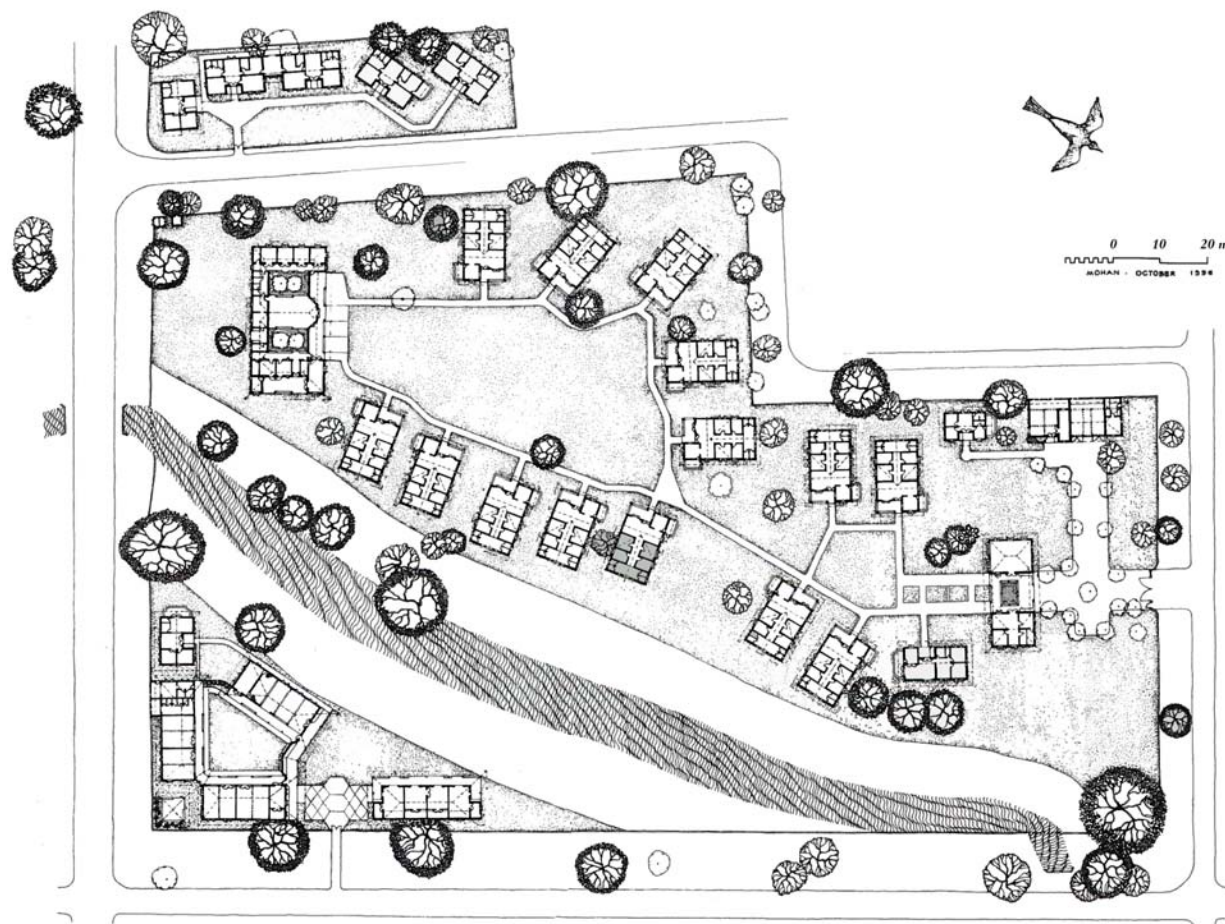


Figure 147: Site plan of the Anuradhapura SOS Children's Village.
 Drawn by: Anjalendran's office.



Figure 148: Section (above) and elevation (below) of a typical "family house," Anuradhapura.
 Drawn by: Anjalendran's office.

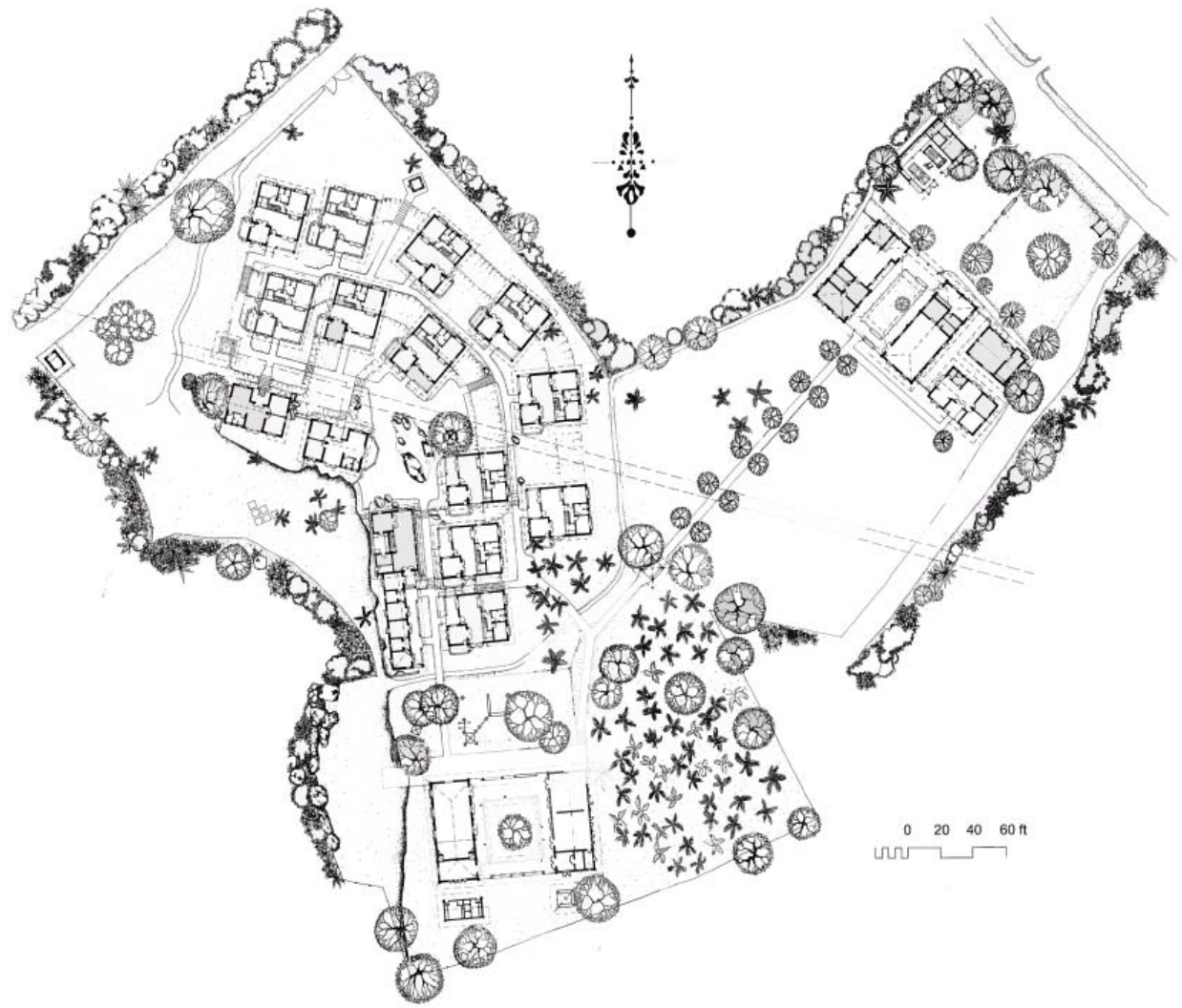


Figure 149: Site plan of Galle SOS Children's Village. Drawn by: Anjalendran's office. By Prasad, 1992.

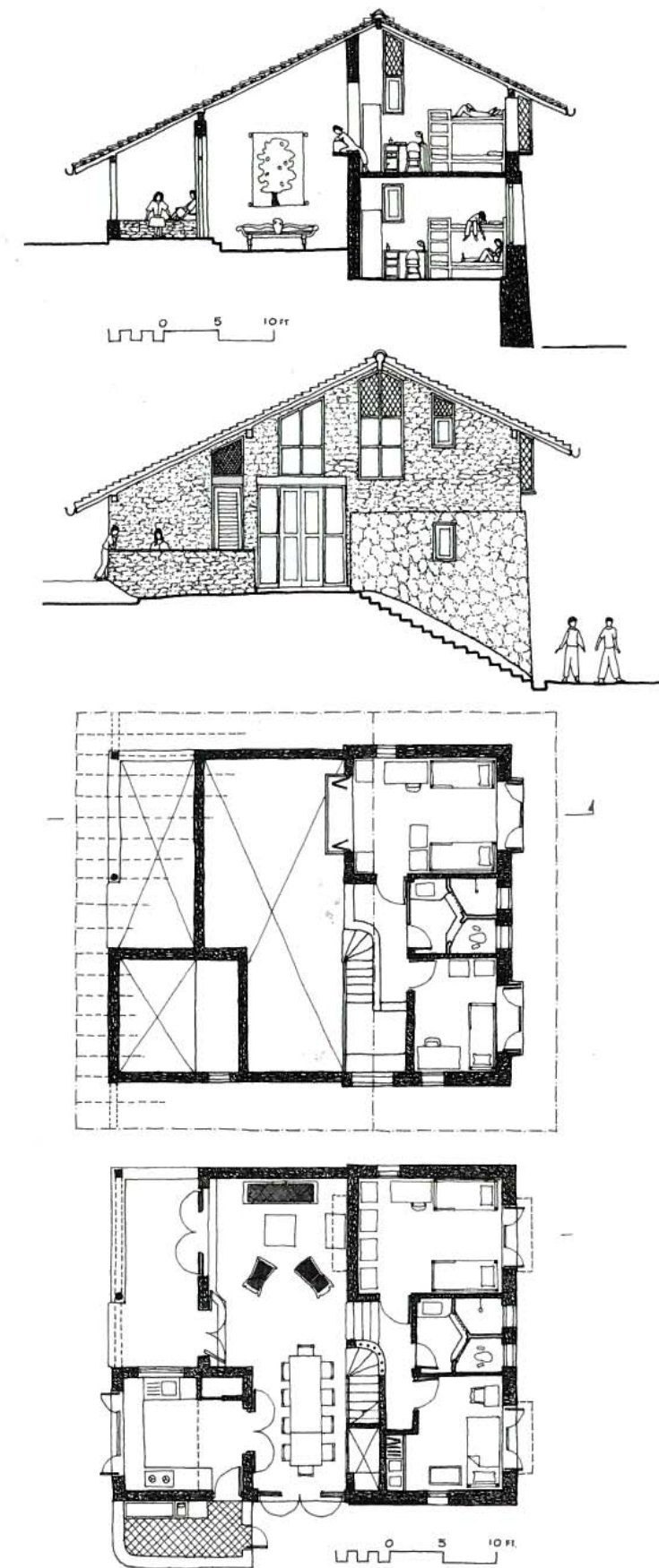


Figure 150: Plans, side elevation and section of the typical "family houses" (bottom to top), Galle. Drawn by: Anjalendran's office.



Figure 151
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Notebook VII

Painting

February 05, 2015

Meeting Emma:

“I’m from the Philippines. I married a Sri Lankan guy...and then I started working at Tiny Tots in Colombo.” Emma and I were speaking in her small office, which at one point had been my grandfather’s study. I asked her whether that was a Montessori. “Tiny Tots is a Montessori. It’s a preschool also. I worked there for about five years. But then I stopped working there because it was too far away. I’m from Ja-Ela and coming back from Colombo...it’s very traffic-heavy. So I started looking for a school in Negombo.”

Emma looked to be in her early forties, with dark, straight hair tightly tied into a ponytail. She had a thick east-Asian accent when she spoke, but it was refreshing to have a conversation with someone who spoke English, especially since I found my Sinhalese to be wanting. She continued, “Unfortunately, they, ahh, have been bankrupt...because of mismanagement. Right, so I worked there for two years. Some of my student’s parents, want to give their children into the other schools but there was a registration fee. If they give them to the other school, they have to pay starting from the beginning.” Emma explained that trying to lighten the financial load on the students’ parents inspired her to start her own Montessori school. As luck would have it, Emma had taught two of my cousins in the past, and knew my uncle, Dr. Weerakkoddy. He was supportive of her proposal, and decided to entrust her with my grandparents’ old home for her school.

“So far, I have many Pakistani children. They are asylum seekers. They asked if they could put the children here. And without admission fee. So, my thing is to help people. People that can’t afford to pay, umm, a lot of money to the other schools.” Upon asking Emma how she funds the Montessori school, she mentioned that she asked the parents to pay a small monthly fee so that she could pay her two teachers. She mentioned that this was manageable. “The parents are paying, but sometimes they are not always able to pay on time. Sometimes the children just left without paying the school fees. So, what can we do?” She laughed. The children continued to run around the small classroom space that was once my grandparent’s living room. The room was overflowing with their youthful voices.

I told Emma about why I was in Sri Lanka—the little I had begun to understand. I mentioned that I had spent a lot of time in this home as a child. That I was fascinated that the old home I remember so well had been converted into a Montessori school. She was overjoyed when I mentioned that I hoped to paint the school before I returned to Canada. I estimated that painting the school needed a day or two, out of the one week I had left.



Figure 152 (top): A view of my grandparents’ old house through the yard, where the original path was.

Figure 153 (bottom): A view of the back of my grandparents’ old house.

Learning from Memory

But what he didn't want to forget was his childhood. [...] And it was quite natural, according to him, that this very distant time had taken control of him now; that when he turns his gaze inward. It lay there as in a brilliant northern summer night, intensified and unsleeping. —Rainer Maria Rilke

We often see memory as a means of transporting ourselves to another time, another place. It gives us a greater context on which to rest our heads when we are not content with our present lives. Memory also serves our practical needs as we rush through our busy lives: the meetings we have, the lectures we attend and the people we promise to have coffee with. Richard Lewis speaks of another quality of memory that we benefit from—its unconscious capacity to educate us. Lewis writes that:

Perhaps for clues we have to go back to some of the qualities of our own earliest learnings—to the time, just as with those children chasing fireflies, when our learnings were somehow our hands and feet, indeed the entire experience of our bodies, sensorially probing the world around us. We have to find those moments that were never defined as learning—but their meanings are still with us: the time we walked in the snow and listened intently to our footsteps, or the time we fell down in the ocean and couldn't catch our breath. We have to remember that our learning, when we were young, was not linear—it is learning, as the novelist Eudora Welty noted in “One Writer's Beginning”, that “stamps you with its moments... It isn't steady. It's a pulse.”⁵¹

The “pulse” that Lewis references is analogous to our memory, from which we are always learning, even when it is not defined as such. Rainer Maria Rilke also writes of a similar sentiment in “The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge”. He reflects on his childhood, sharing many anecdotes of these times. In his text, he is critical of his own development as a writer and poet, revealing that, “it is not yet enough to have memories. You must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait until they return.” Rilke continues to unwrap the powerful unconscious nature of memory to remain inside of our bodies. He writes that “the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves,”⁵² only then do they transcend their elementary purpose—then we are our memory.

A Home over Time

My grandparents' home, now a Montessori school, was originally a shop—a “kadai,” and only half its current size. A few months after returning from Sri Lanka, I laid out a floor plan I had sketched of their house, and my mother began pointing and describing features of the kadai as she remembered them.

She slowly began to piece together all the transformations the house had undergone, sharing details like, “around this area, there were some sort of columns to support the roof. At the time we had a tackarang roof,” she added. I asked if that meant corrugated steel and she nodded. “Aluminum, it was a lighter roof than now.” We were like a pair of forensic detectives unravelling a mystery, as we slowly reassembled the remnants from her childhood memories. She waved her hands in an attempt to convey the shapes and slopes of things while I sketched. “At the time, the washroom was over here, outside.” She pointed to the edge of the property. “It was just a small room with an in-ground toilet. There were people that collected the waste daily. They would travel down the street with carts.”

As she began to designate pieces of furniture that occupied the store, I started to get a better sense of what the space felt like. “We had racks along these walls. Cashier tables here that blocked anyone from entering the store, they could only stand here and ask for what they would like” I started to add notes to my drawing. “Onions, green chilies—we put vegetables here... Bananas.” She thought for a moment and continued, “Canned food, packet foods and things like that.” She pointed to another area and said, “Pots and pans, there were a lot of them just on the ground. Towards the front there were large bags of rice, coconuts, flour, lentils and other items in bulk.” She remembered the manual scale that hung above the front table where items were weighted and priced.

At the time, the space was used almost exclusively as a store. “We cooked at our home and brought food here for the person who looked after the store,” my mother explained. I asked her what had persuaded them to abandon the kadai and transform the place. “People began to steal from the store,” she replied. “The people that we hired to work there during the day took things from the store—it was very difficult to manage a business this way.” My mother was having difficulty recalling an addition to the kadai that accommodated a bathroom and kitchen, and decided to make a phone call to my aunt. They were soon deep in conversation, drawing forth intermittent details from a trove of shared memories. With my aunt's help, we continued to piece together the rest of the house's twenty-year history.

Once a kitchen and a bathroom were added to the kadai, it was fit to be a home, and my grandparents listed the house for rent. It was then occupied by a number of tenants for several years. There was a note of excitement in my mother's voice as she and her sister relived their memories of that old house. I imagine the nostalgia must have taken them quite by surprise, like stumbling across a box of old belongings stored away long ago. Towards the end of their conversation, I learned that my grandparents had eventually moved into the home with my mother, her three sisters and her brother. Not long after, they had realized that the house was too small, with only two tiny bedrooms between the seven of them. So they relocated across the yard to their original house, my childhood home.

Its next transformation occurred due to the growing demand for rental houses from foreigners traveling to Sri Lanka. For a number of years, the house was inhabited by several Swiss, Dutch and German tourists. After that period, my grandparents moved back in with their family. Around the same time, their children started to marry and relocated to their own parcels on the property to build houses of their own. My grandparents stayed in that old home for as long as I could remember. Their old home had reinvented itself several times, each a result of life's unexpected demands. And once again, it was about to take on a whole new identity.

On Houses

*For even as you have home-comings in your twilight,
so has the wanderer in you, the ever distant and alone.
Your house is your larger body.
It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night;
and it is not dreamless.
Does not your house dream?
and dreaming, leave the city for grove or hill-top?*

—Kahlil Gibran

February 06, 2015

It was the first time that I had taken a moment to look at my grandparents' old home from a distance. I couldn't help but notice the fence that now separated it from the rest of the yard and the locks that hung from the closed doors. It now assumed the role of a Montessori, but when I was a child, doors and windows were always open because my grandparents were always home. My eyes searched the yard for remnants of the path that I had traced countless times with my feet. While I noticed the drastic changes time had played out on my grandparents' house, I was reminded of how delicately our perceptions rely on the nuances to define a place in our memory.

A languid atmosphere hung about the house—a physical weariness that had manifested itself after my grandparents moved away. It appeared to be barely hanging on to its supports. I walked around it, feeling the brittle paint that cracked and splintered along its walls, peeling away literal fragments of its history. The wooden window frames showed years of decay, eroded by termites that bore tiny tunnels beneath the surface. I leaned over to remove some strands of grass that were growing out of the concrete, and noticed that the foundations were crumbling under the poor posture of the house. The fence was bare, but reminded me of the colourful flowers and plants that once surrounded and framed the house beautifully. The only colour that remained were from a recently added children's slide and climber, but even those were dulled from months of use and rainfall.

The morning sun quietly peaked over the back of the old house. Like my grandparents, their home had aged without me. It had been stricken by time, no different from the nearby beach whose shells had been depleted, or the foot-beaten path through the property that no longer remained. My grandparents were no longer fit to live on their own and although their old home persevered, it had also grown old and weary. It wept of lost life, and like my *mama* and *papa*, it too needed our love and support.



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Figure 154 (previous page): The front of my grandparents' old home from the street. 7:15 a.m.

Figure 155 (above): The front entrance from the living room of my grandparents' old home.

February 07, 2015

As usual, Gamini was sitting under a coconut tree chewing bulath vita as I walked back to collect tools from the shed. I called him over and asked if he was interested in helping me paint the Montessori school. He quietly nodded his head and followed, neatly packing away his betel leaf stack, areca seed and giraya: a small tong with a blade that resembled a nutcracker. I learned that bulath vita was a combination of betel leaf and the powder from the areca nut that produced the red pigment in his mouth as he chewed it—a tradition in Southeast Asia since antiquity.

Gamini joined me as I inspected the Montessori school, which needed a lot of preparation before a fresh coat of paint could be applied. The exterior walls were deteriorating from exposure to the sun and rain. The inside was worn to the bone from years of use. We began to scrape off the paint, bringing down brittle chunks of concrete along with it. I noticed the long cracks that ran through the concrete, like shrivelled veins that extended from the floor up to the roof. We were covering the ground beneath us with a thick layer of old paint and dust. I offered Gamini a mask, which I had bought from the hardware store in town, but he stared at me for a moment and continued scraping furiously. I glanced over frequently, attempting to pick up Gamini's skillful technique. The sharp lines that ran through his palm revealed decades of experience: scraping, sanding, cutting and building.

Upon stripping most of the back wall, I began to wonder whether we were creating an unachievable goal for ourselves—attempting to repair the wall before painting it was extending our work beyond our time frame. This feeling continued to intensify as we split up and proceeded to scrape the side walls. Without us noticing it, the sun was beginning to set behind us, and although Gamini had nearly completed his side, I was still halfway to being finished.



Figure 156 (left): The front porch after scraping off old paint.



Figure 157 (right): The living room space after scraping and applying putty.



Figure 158: A view of the progress from the street. 5:30 p.m.



Figure 159 (top): Gamini covering dried concrete patchwork with putty.

Figure 160 (bottom): Wrapping up the last bits of scraping on the interior.

The last bit of daylight disappeared and I found Gamini sitting against the fence, preparing his bulath vita. He was well ahead of me and decided to take a break, precisely estimating the time it would take me catch up to him. When we completed scraping and filling the exterior walls, Gamini and I prepared cement to fill the gaps in the concrete too large to be fixed by putty. My aunt arrived with tea, just as we began to apply the concrete and I had to wrestle the trowel out of Gamini's hands for him to take a break from working. We sat on the floor in complete silence and savoured each sip of tea, while the dust around us settled in the glow of the sunset.

We rushed through the night to patch the interior walls, hoping the putty would harden overnight such that we could paint in the morning. Neither of us spoke while we moved through the dim interior spaces, which, lacking the warmth of the sun's rays, appeared more lifeless than ever.



Figure 161: Taking an evening tea break near the front entrance.

February 08, 2015

The next morning I awoke before sunrise. I walked towards my grandparents' old home, appreciating once more the serenity of early mornings. The strands of sunlight were so delicate and everything around me was just beginning to blossom. The gate and the doors were wide open when I reached the Montessori school. I met Emma's helper, who she called Mary Aunty, furiously sweeping the floors as I entered.

I ignored the sharp pain in my hands, arms and back while I sanded away the excess putty. The pain was more noticeable when I paused, so I maintained a consistent pace with the sandpaper. When Mary Aunty returned, Gamini and I were still sanding. She stuck around for another hour, moving tables and chairs out of our way, and covering every surface with newspaper.

The containers of paint detailed a specific proportion of water to paint but both Gamini and my uncle had suggested mixing double the amount of water. I resorted to a quantity between their suggestion and what was indicated on the labels. After I mixed the paint, Gamini began painting as if his life depended on it. I collected large cardboard boxes from the shed and laid them out to cover the black varnished floor.

We had started without realizing that it would have been best to paint the exterior first (we could have painted the interior even after nightfall.) We moved all of our supplies outside after which I left him with the colour scheme and drove to pick up more paint. Even with additional water, I had underestimated the quantity of paint we needed.

The sunset added its own warm hues to our palette. When we reached the back face of the Montessori, I realized that we couldn't reach anywhere near the peak of the wall with our ladder. We built make-shift extensions to our rollers with wooden poles we found inside the Montessori school, but we were still unable to reach the highest portions of the walls.



Figure 162: Gamini painting the smaller classroom walls.

I remembered a large wooden ladder I had seen at my uncle's construction site when I stopped by to pick up a bag of cement. The trouble was finding a way to transport the large ladder. After considering all possible options, I called Zaheer, our family driver, in desperation. He was picking up a client when he answered the phone and promised to look into it. Gamini and I continued to paint what was within our reach.

A short while later, we heard the distinctive sputtering of Zaheer's rickshaw. We paused, and saw him entering the yard in the distance, the rickshaw wobbling across the uneven path to the house. When he cleared the coconut trees, I was completely unprepared for what I saw. The base of the ladder had been wedged into the back of the rickshaw, while the rest stuck out behind it, three times the length of the pint-sized vehicle. It was astonishing that Zaheer and his rickshaw hadn't toppled over. I cheered him on as he sheepishly walked to the back of the rickshaw and dislodged the ladder.



Figure 163: Marking the front exterior before painting. 6:10 p.m.



Figure 164 (above): The Montessori school colour palette, inspired by the SOS Children's Villages.

Figure 165 (following page): Continuing to paint the exterior after nightfall.



Occasionally, people passing through the street stopped by the fence and curiously looked on as we painted. The sun had set and we were painting the front of the Montessori. The process had become theatrical for the local people. They pointed at us as we hung from our ladders, holding a bucket of paint in one hand and a brush in the other. Our bodies leaned closely against the ladder, forming distorted shadows on the face of the house. My younger cousins ran around excitedly, tampering with the shop light, which flooded the front yard with a brilliant yellow light.

Eventually, the streets were silent and dark. The shop light flickered as bugs continually flew into it. The stray dogs that had been squabbling all evening had curled up to sleep along the road. Around 4 a.m. the light began to flicker more frequently, as if there was a problem with the connection. Gamini and I continued to glance over our shoulders as it pulsed, and then everything went black.

February 09, 2015

Rain clouds had moved in. I rushed to the Montessori school early in the morning, hoping to finish the last bit of painting. I was applying the final touches to the front facade when Gamini joined me. Before we reached the back, large drops of rain began to fall and we hurried to cover the fresh paint with large pieces of cardboard.

There was no time to wait for the rain to subside—there was no telling whether it would anyway. We continued to paint the back wall, relying on the roof overhang to shelter it from the rain.



Figure 166: Relocating to the back of the house to complete the last facade.



Figure 167: Painting the back face of the building as it continued to rain.



Figure 168 (top): Painting the final bits of the interior classroom space.

Figure 169 (bottom): Applying the final touches to the black, varnished floor trim.

Healing a Wound

I am bound to the earth by a web of stories, as I am bound to the creation by the very substance and rhythms of my flesh. By keeping the stories fresh, I keep the places themselves alive in my imagination. —Scott Russell Sanders.

At first, the process of painting the Montessori school seemed like it would be a straightforward task. It was when Gamini and I spent hours scraping the existing paint and concrete, that I had realized the real scope of our undertaking. The walls were worn from decades of use and the peeling layers were dense with meaning that I only understood deep into the process. I was reminded of the potential architecture had in telling and continuing a story. I began to realize that the exterior of the Montessori school was really as important as the skin that covers our bodies. Refurbishing it meant more than applying a layer of paint; it was a process of repairing years of history—a process of healing.

As I continued to fill pieces of the walls together with cement and putty, I was stitching together pieces of memory I found scattered in that home. I was reconciling years that I had spent away. When we began to paint, it became apparent to me how important the built form of the Montessori is to the children who occupied it. This sentiment took me back to my explorations early in my master's studies, when I had written about the importance of the aesthetic of a building to inspire a sense of pride and belonging. I had learned that this sub-consciously influenced students to be bound to the values and principles that their school represent.

I thought back to my experience attending my own childhood school in Negombo, and my feeling that the school was inadequate for children, after having attended a number of elementary schools in Canada. This feeling was etched so deeply within me at such a young age that it stayed with me, and is perhaps the catalyst behind my original thesis intentions. It was important for me to reconnect with my childhood, and the process of painting the Montessori helped complete that process.

I had painted the Montessori school with an array of colours that were inspired by my travels in Sri Lanka: the monsoon green, orange sunset, and the vibrant palette that had infiltrated my mind after visiting Anjalendran's SOS Children's Villages. This was now the medium of communication and contact for the Montessori school, drastically different from what it was when my grandparents once inhabited it. The children were undoubtedly using it in their own way, and unaware of its distant past. The house, which had transformed so many times over the years, was preparing for a new chapter of its story.

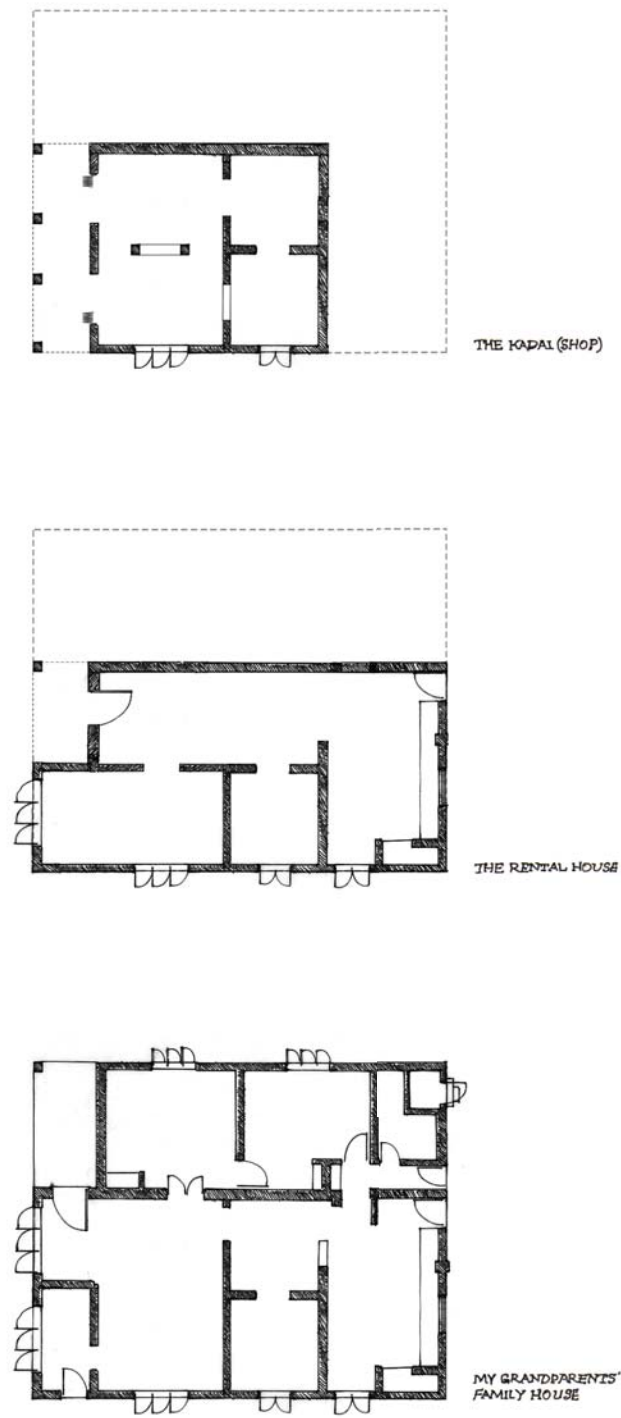


Figure 170: A drawing illustrating the transformation of my grandparents' old home over time.
Drawn by: Author.

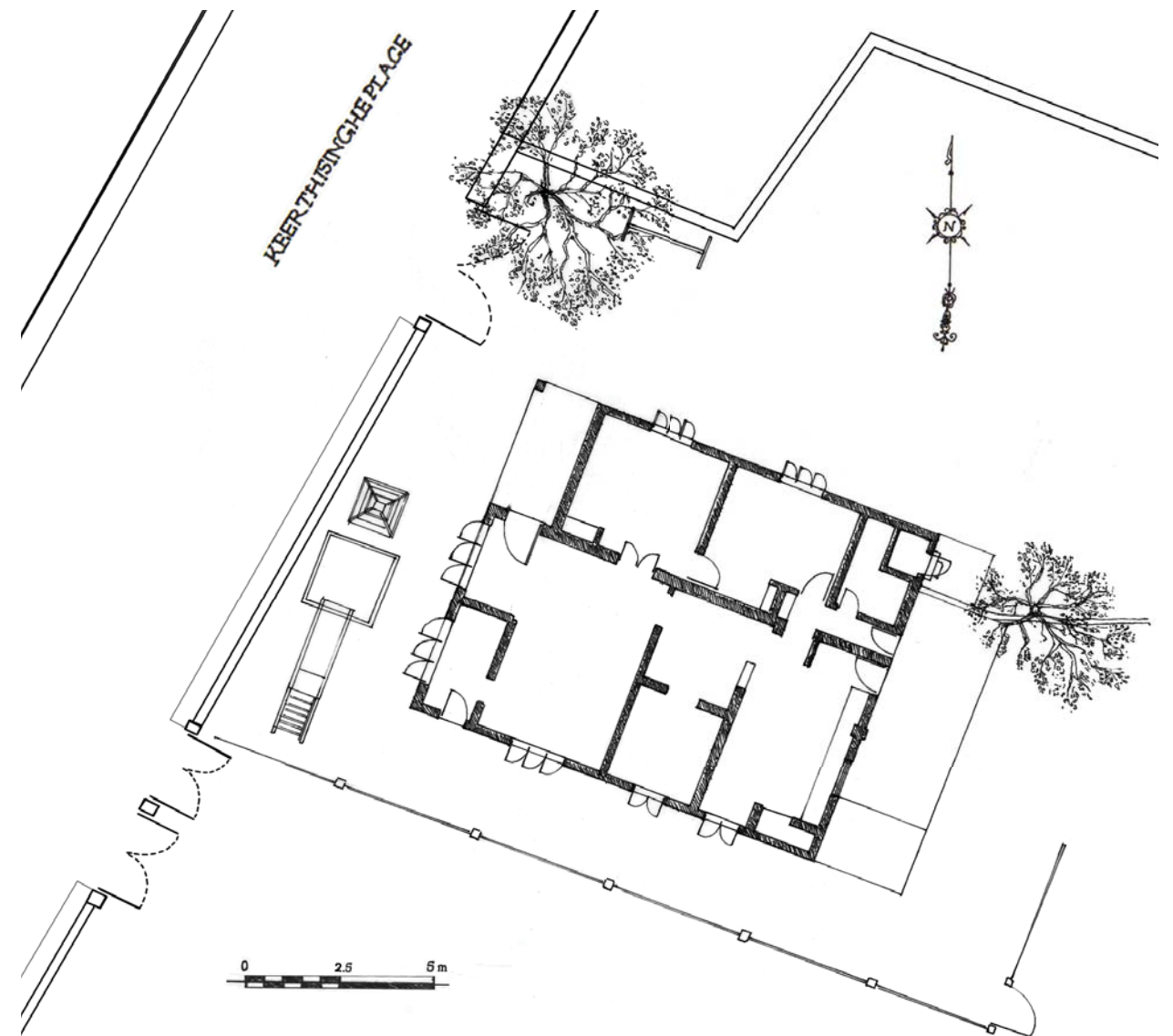


Figure 171: The ground floor plan of my grandparents' old home as it is now.
Drawn by: Author.



Figure 172
258

Notebook VIII

Seeing

February 10, 2015

*If your ears see, and your eyes hear, not a doubt you'll cherish—
How naturally the rain drips from the eaves! —Daito Kokushi*

Upon exiting the empty highway, I steered through the roads of Colombo with ease, my right hand reaching for the horn as if I had done it all my life. Even through the heavy rain, I was able to recognize the streets that were now ingrained in my memory.

Kumar stood near the front door holding an umbrella, but I hurried inside before he could offer it to me. Kalu rushed to the entrance and sniffed me, with greater ease than on the first time I had visited. Anjalendran was sitting quietly on his work table under a dim light. His eyes were focused on a book that he had been drafting to be published. I stood looking over his shoulder at a few pages from the book before he invited me to join him at the table. He set down his glasses and asked me whether I would like a plate of *lamprais* (a dish of rice, meat and vegetable curries, wrapped and baked in banana leaf). I gladly accepted his offer, realizing that in my rush to resume painting I had completely forgotten to eat. Anjalendran shared more from his book entitled *The Architectural Heritage of Sri Lanka*, before Kumar arrived with a steaming plate of *lamprais*.

As I ate, I thought about my final days in Sri Lanka. On my drive into the city, I had contemplated over how I would thank Anjalendran for his time, and for sharing with me his extensive knowledge of Sri Lanka's long architectural lineage, which had greatly influenced my travels.

The heavy rainfall filled the silence while I ate. There were no gutters to catch the rain from the roof; all the water rushed down the clay tiles and onto the red pebbles in the courtyard, before making its way to a hidden drain. Nothing separated us from the outside, and at times the wind would carry mist into the living area.

My eyes scanned the artwork and artifacts that occupied every conceivable space of Anjalendran's home. Every curious painting and unique sculpture spoke of the richness of Anjalendran's fascinations, and were an outward representation of his storied life. Everything made sense at that moment: the rain that continued to plunge a few feet away, the "small things" that populated every nook and cranny, and the piles of books that rested on almost every surface. A pristine rickshaw sat lifelessly near the entrance of his home while a metal chair, designed by Geoffrey Bawa, celebrated the downpour within the courtyard.



Figure 173 (above): A view towards the dining & office area of Anjalendran's home, Colombo.

Figure 174 (following page): A view of the courtyard looking into the office veranda.



February 11, 2015

I set the gear in neutral and thought about all of the time I had spent in Sri Lanka with my family: the quiet evenings on the front veranda with my grandparents, moments that I would carry with me for the rest of my life. I remembered that I had arrived in Sri Lanka searching for answers to my thesis and now felt I had come to find so much more. Any thoughts and ideas concerning my thesis had taken a back seat to the vibrant and varied elements of life I had found here. But what stood out were the evenings when I took my grandfather around the yard on his wheelchair; the time I used my laptop to play a classical Indian symphony for my grandmother and her eyes widened like I had never seen before; or the time I took my younger cousin on an expedition to survey each of the five houses on the property with a broken tape measure.

It was 4:30 a.m. and I drove through the empty streets of Sri Lanka. Three months into my trip and I was finally beginning to feel a sense of belonging. The initial reservations I felt upon arriving had given way to a new-found feeling of comfort and awareness for the place where I was born. In a peculiar way, even the dark empty streets resembled the extended families of both my mother and father who have lived in the country all their lives. Knowing that my grandparents, who had lived in the country for almost a century, waited for me in my home in Negombo brought me a great sense of belonging—a grounding that I could not find anywhere else in the world.



Figure 175: Tree-covered road near Kurunagala after four hours of driving.

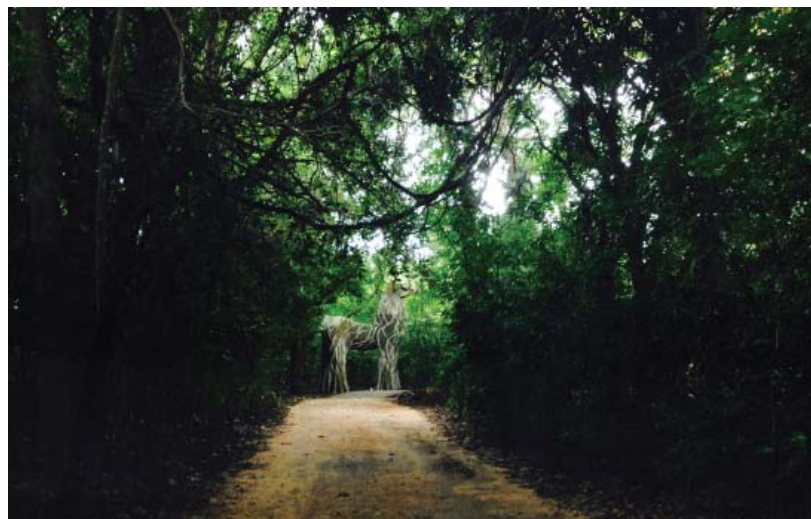


Figure 176 (top): The entrance gate into “Diyabubula” from a narrow gravel road, Dambulla.

Figure 177 (bottom): A large horse sculpture along the entry path.

*The road to enlightenment is an unpaved road,
closed to public transportation. —Siddhartha, Tom Robbins.*

Five hours into my drive, I was in the middle of a remote village, with not a single house in sight. The trees steadily grew thicker and closer as I continued, until the road was barely fit for one vehicle. I followed a series of directions I had written in my sketchbook, last of which was to find a sign that read “Diyabubula.”

I entered through a most beautiful oasis. An aged concrete path led to a pavilion. I walked up a few steps onto a platform under the thick roof, which was overflowing with plant life. There were no walls, but the roof was held up by a series of narrow tree trunks. An incredible panoramic landscape unfolded from inside the pavilion. Each step into the compound flooded my senses. In addition to the assortment of forest sounds, there was a classical symphony that played all around me.

In the distance, I saw a man sitting on a wheel chair, holding a set of binoculars, looking firmly into the distant forest ahead of him. Anjalendran had told me about his friend Laki, an artist who had also worked closely with Geoffrey Bawa for years as his draughtsman. He was perched on a concrete platform that extended out from the pavilion. It hovered inconspicuously through the landscape, without any form of handrail. As I neared him, with binoculars still pressed tightly against his face, Laki spoke about the bird that he was patiently observing. He continued softly, as if we had met before, telling me of all the birds that visit the forest around him.

Behind me, a group of monkeys emerged out of the thick shrubbery on his pavilion, screaming and baring their sharp teeth at each other. Laki turned his wheel chair and placed the binoculars onto a small steel table. He lifted his arms into the air and began pointing at the monkeys, narrating the story of their bitter wars. After a short and chaotic scene, the monkeys fled the rooftop, and without even knowing it, I was soon engaged in a conversation with Laki as deep and engrossing as that thick forest where the animals played out their raucous histories.

Laki spoke in a calm, soft manner with the remnants of a British accent. Every so often, he gently stroked his long white beard in the middle of conversation. The classical symphony continued around us. He had moved onto this land in 1971. He shared the history behind his forest, saying that it was “an agricultural piece of land, which was bare. Virtually nothing of what you see here was there. But after five years, we grew things, and they grew very well but when you try to sell them, it becomes a problem, you know. So I abandoned that and grew the forest back. At that time my mind was focused on doing agriculture, and I had no money at all anyway. So I couldn’t think of any grand designing or anything. So I just built things as I got a little bit of money.” The symphony around us picked up its pace and I couldn’t help but look around in search of where the music was coming from.

“So originally, this house was there,” he pointed towards the entrance of his compound. “Where the horse sculpture is, there is a podium and steps. There is a foundation there.” Although he sat in a wheelchair, Laki articulated expressively with his arms as he spoke. “This structure was there because that was the only place with water. There is a dam there, so when I first came that was the only place visually that there was water. So naturally, I built the house there so I could look down at the water. Then, one day I realized, while I was up there, that this was a little hollow depression full of wild grass and bananas and rubbish.” I followed his arm as he swept it across the incredible landscape and pointed at the body of water in front of us. “I realized that this was considerably lower than the water level there. So if I banged a hole that this would flood... So the next morning I had a lake.” He then laughed. A laughter that was as gentle as his voice. His smile was genuine and invigorating. He told me that there was a natural spring on his site and that *Diyabubula* meant water-bubble. The water flowed from the spring, into his man-made pond and through a series of smaller ponds to a distant river.

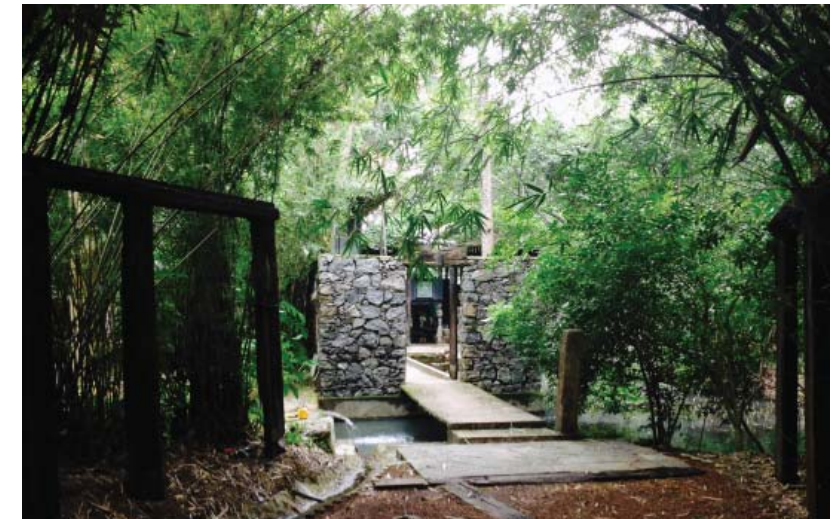


Figure 178 (top): A small bridge leading to Laki's pavilion.

Figure 179 (bottom): A view from the outdoor platform towards Laki's planted pavilion and pond.

“This rock wasn’t visible, there was earth on either side,” Laki said, as he pointed to a large, black stone that I had not noticed. It was just as large as the pavilion under which it rested, sinking into the body of water. “But I knew that there was a rock because I could see the top of it, which was eroded. So over the years, we dug it down. Dug it down almost ten feet. Then the rock came out of the earth.” He continued recounting the step-by-step process, as if he was remembering it for himself along the way. “So then, it was obvious that this was a nicer place, there’s water here, there’s big rocks here. So I uprooted this house and planted it here.” He laughed again. “It has grown, by thinking one step into the next.” He continued to laugh softly before whistling along with the symphony he knew all too well.

Shortly afterwards, Laki’s friend Michael appeared from under the pavilion and joined us in conversation. “Bahhhh, look at this Michael!” He said, suddenly pointed into the trees in the middle of conversation. “A big pied hornbill has just come up to this tree here. Beautiful, ah.” I asked Laki more about the bird and he said that it was a “Malabar pied hornbill. Native to Malabar but also found in Sri Lanka.”

A woman gently holding a platter of tea arrived and we all picked up cups of ginger tea with thanks. Laki continued to whistle along to a melody he seemed to have memorized and I realized that the sun was slowly setting behind us. I picked up my camera and walked through the wilderness, hoping to capture the last moments of sunlight against the forest.

When I returned our conversation extended to details of various local trees, plants and fruits, interspersed with brief moments of silence to appreciate the symphony that rang against the sounds of the forest. My eyes were constantly in the treetops, where if I focused long enough, I could always find another one of Laki’s marvellous sculptures.

Laki was a man of many talents, which seemed so integral to his life that one would not call it an occupation. He was a painter and sculptor who had a fascination with owls. Even when the landscape around us was quiet, his magnificent sculptures beamed full of life. My eyes and ears were distracted when Laki suddenly asked: “Toronto....so you, is that where Michael Ondaatje lives, in Toronto?” He was looking at me as if I would know Michael Ondaatje because we were from the same city. “He’s a very sweet fellow. You know, so Michael, in 1964 or something, he brought out his first book of poems and I did the cover design for it. Now, he gave me a autographed copy of it—where that is, God knows.” He chuckled to himself, momentarily escaping his forest retreat to another time.

Laki picked up my sketchbook and started flipping through it. He said that it is important to use a pen that could accommodate varying thicknesses to add depth to a drawing. “To have a line that you can flex. So that you can move from thick to thin, but also from dark to light—otherwise the drawing is flat,” He said. “Now I’ll tell you the ideal instrument for that, which I use...A porcupine quill.” Michael and I looked at each other in amazement, bursting into laughter. “No, I use it, that’s why I’m telling you. I may have some left...If I do, I will give them to you.” Laki shared a detailed process of preparing the quills to become the perfect drawing instrument.

After hours of conversation, Laki politely stood up and resigned to his sleeping quarters to prepare for his morning trip to Colombo. The musical landscape had mesmerized me, and I had lost all sense of time. A series of lights illuminated the tree canopies, revealing the majestic sculptures hiding within them. The water was so still that it was impossible to distinguish the forest from its reflection. I was affixed to the owl sculptures that appeared so real their shrieks echoed in my head.



Figure 180: Laki Senanayake on the outdoor platform overlooking his pond.



Figure 181 (above): Laki's beaming metal owl sculpture near the entry.

Figure 182 (following page): A view of Laki's pavilion disappearing into the surrounding forest.





Figure 183 (top): A kingfisher eyeing its prey seconds before diving towards the pond.

Figure 184 (bottom): A wild boar sculpture rummaging near the pond.



Figure 185 (top): An owl sculpture appearing out of the distant forest.

Figure 186 (bottom): Looking towards the front entry and the decorative concrete path detail.



Figure 187 (above): A view from across the pond towards Laki's pavilion as the sun sets.

Figure 188 (following spread): The sun setting behind the illuminated forest. As seen from Laki's platform.

Michael and I walked towards my car in the darkness, when I suddenly realized that I couldn't find my keys. I searched all of my pockets and the insides of my bag. We scanned every inch of Laki's garden, retracing my steps. For thirty minutes our flashlights floated around the forest like fireflies, but nothing turned up. I was convinced that my keys had been snatched by one of the mischievous monkeys or hanging from the mouth of some creature, descending deep into the forest, and into the night. We reconvened near my car and I pulled on the door handles in desperation. I focused my light against the car windows when something glinted in the darkness. Sure enough, my keys were resting on the back seat under my backpack.

We were all exhausted after prying the rear window open and retrieving the keys with a metal wire—an hour long process. Michael suggested I spend the night at Laki's instead of trying to navigate through the dark. I slipped my car keys deep into my pocket and headed back to the pavilion with him.

Only blackness filled my eyes when all of the lights were turned off. With not a single wall around us, the darkness was so thick, I felt like I could grab hold of it. Only the mosquito net that I had neatly tucked around my bed separated me from the forest. I wrapped my body around all of my belongings before closing my eyes. The classical symphony had come to a stop, but the forest continued to sing in all its splendour.



On Living

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one. —Virginia Woolf

In her book “A Hut of One’s Own”, Ann Cline shares her experience of building a hut in the wilderness of her property. She writes, “As my dwelling took shape, it began to shape my life as well.”⁵³ Although the qualities of architectural spaces are typically determined from the outset, in simple shelters and huts they are discovered through inhabitation, which gives them a highly personal quality. Cline writes about the delicate, yet fulfilling relationship she shared with her intimate space over time. This concept was fully embodied in Laki’s own life, for in the thirty years he has spent creating it, the home has grown around and along with him and continues to captivate his imagination. The sounds of the forest, the birds that nested in it, and the monitor lizards that crawled through it all inform his everyday life and inspires his artwork.

Laki’s pavilion rested gently on the landscape and preserves the impression of being undesigned, as if it had always been there. The boundaries of architecture were thin: the forms, facades, and thresholds all dissolved into the vast forest that enveloped them. The built spaces opened up and welcomed the natural world; the sound of rain, the smell of the plants and the moist air were all in constant dialogue. Laki did not have a television, but instead viewed a “world of pure experience,”⁵⁴ within which he was both the audience and the performer.

I came to realize that most of the buildings I had inhabited in the Western world were so closed off from the environment that I wouldn’t even know when it was raining. The built form and the natural environment often sat in opposition, and as a result, hindered the possibility of any exchange. I would cherish each time the sunlight entered a building and touched a surface, bringing the material to life. I sought places near windows or outdoor patios, where I was able to embrace the natural environment. It was clear that a greater resonance with the world would not be possible unless we welcome the idea of living as an inextricable part of our natural world.

I had read about the experience of simple shelters through writers like Cline and Heidegger, and experienced a few in my travels, but none compared to my visit to Laki’s “Diyabubula”, which had been revolutionary to my understanding of how one can live. I realized that we are predisposed to certain beliefs in our everyday lives and upbringing, and over the years it becomes increasingly harder to break away. My travels offered me a different precedent for living—one that is uncommon in the Western world. But most importantly, it reminded that I am free to think outside of my existing structures of thought.

Often, I would recall the night I spent at Laki’s humble oasis, and the feeling of yielding myself to the forest that stretched endlessly all around me. The stars silently accompanied me amidst the frenzy of the living forest at night. I felt vulnerable in that place, but as a result, developed an innate intimacy with the simple built forms that sheltered me. The feeling of being so naked, so bare to our natural surroundings heightens our perception of the built world, and gradually, we learn to feel as comfortable within it as we are in our own skin.

February 12, 2015

The darkness was worse than ever before. Not even the houses along the side of the road were lit. I sped through the dim roads, remembering that I had only slept for a few hours; I decided to release my foot from the pedal and slow down. I was driving through a thick forest following signs that were illuminated by my headlights before reaching a large building that faced the dark hillside.

My last destination in Sri Lanka was a place I had been hoping to visit throughout my trip and it happened to be a twenty minute drive from Laki’s *Diyabubula*. The building was designed by Geoffrey Bawa, and even included some of Laki’s sculptures. It was originally meant to be constructed on a site next to the famous rock citadel at Sigiriya. However, when Bawa visited the site, he realized that it was too close to the rock, and rejected it. He suggested an alternative site ten kilometers away in the far side of the ancient Kandalama reservoir. The hotel is set high on the end of a ridge with its back to a cliff, overlooking the reservoir to a distant view of the Sigiriya Rock.

There was no indication of a parking lot, so I parked my small blue Tata a few meters from the entrance, between two shiny Land Rovers. I stepped out into a landscape that I couldn’t make out in the darkness. I walked towards the front doors, realizing that I was arriving at the Kandalama Hotel lobby at 4:30 a.m. The concierges standing behind the counter remained completely still—as if they had seen a ghost. I turned to smile at them as I passed the front desk, leaving them staring at each other in disbelief.

“Sir...ah...Do you have a reservation?” One of them asked, hesitantly. I took a few more steps before looking over my shoulder, pretending I hadn’t heard him. “A reservation, sir. Do you have a reservation?”

“No... I’m here for breakfast,” I said, pausing, as surprised at how ridiculous my response was as they were. Regardless, I continued into the dark corridor.



Figure 189 (above): A view back at the Kandalama Hotel from its outdoor terrace, Dambulla. 4:45 a.m.

Figure 190 (following spread): The view from the terrace towards the Lake. 5:45 a.m.

The entire hotel was asleep. I resorted to my cellphone light to climb a large stairwell that lead to the upper deck. Not a single light was on. I interrupted the perfect silence that filled the space, bumping into chairs and tables, as I shuffled through the darkness. An oppressive feeling of unease consumed me as I ran my hands along the walls searching for light switches. As my eyes began to adjust, I saw dark objects speeding through the air, and felt them narrowly passing by my face. They were in fact small bats feeding on the insects that had made their way into the hotel, which was open to the surrounding forest.

When I snapped on the first light switch, I let out a gasp of relief and as my eyes adjusted to the light, the large space around me slowly took form. At any given moment, one could turn the corner and find enormous black stone jutting into the interior. It was as if the entire building had miraculously grown out of the rocky face of the mountain.

I carried all of my belongings with me, worried that monkeys would snatch them, but it appeared that even they were sleeping. When I opened the large door that took me out onto the deck, the buzzing of the forest at night flooded in. Frogs roared in the distant landscape around me and occasionally I heard the shrill cries of birds. There was not a moment of silence in between the sounds—it was utterly continuous. As I carefully walked towards the edge of the deck, I was barely able to distinguish the water from the black silhouette of the tree tops. The dark landscape blended into the sky like a seamless extension of the canvas of space, speckled by innumerable glittering stars.



At approximately 5:45 a.m., the sun began to peak in the distance, illuminating everything in sight. I was surrounded by a much larger body of water than I had imagined. As the lake awakened, a thick layer of fog swept through it, engulfing it entirely before opening up to a clear blue sky.

With each minute of sunrise, the landscape around me screamed with the sound of a thousand birds waking up and warming up their wings in the light of dawn. The landscape got louder and brighter, much faster than my eyes and ears could adjust. The sun washed into the building and even awoke the large owl that spread its wings across two columns. I found many of Laki's sculptures throughout the place, and felt his infinite wisdom as I stared into the sharp eyes of the owl he had once carved by hand. Eventually, the sound of the landscape was mixed with that of tourists flocking all around the building.

I walked deeper into the building, realizing that the exterior walls hugged the hillside advantageously, distancing itself from it at times, creating outdoor space in between. The hallways to the rooms were spaces themselves, each with a seating area, framing a piece of the landscape like a beautifully curated series of paintings. There were no real walls to the exterior, but a series of columns allowed the trees to spread their canopies into the building. Vines had grown throughout and hung off the balconies as if they had already been claimed by nature. The building looked towards the sublime moments of the landscape it nested against, and proudly wore the sun's rays just the same.



Figure 191: The view from the terrace towards the lake after sunrise, 7:00 a.m.



Figure 192 (above): A view through the lounge to the landscape beyond.

Figure 193 (below): A stairwell framing a view of the landscape.



Figure 194: A view from a stairwell landing with an opportunity to sit.



Figure 195: A metal owl sculptor by Laki, wings spanning the columns.



Figure 196: The hallway spaces leading to the rooms, facing the hillside.

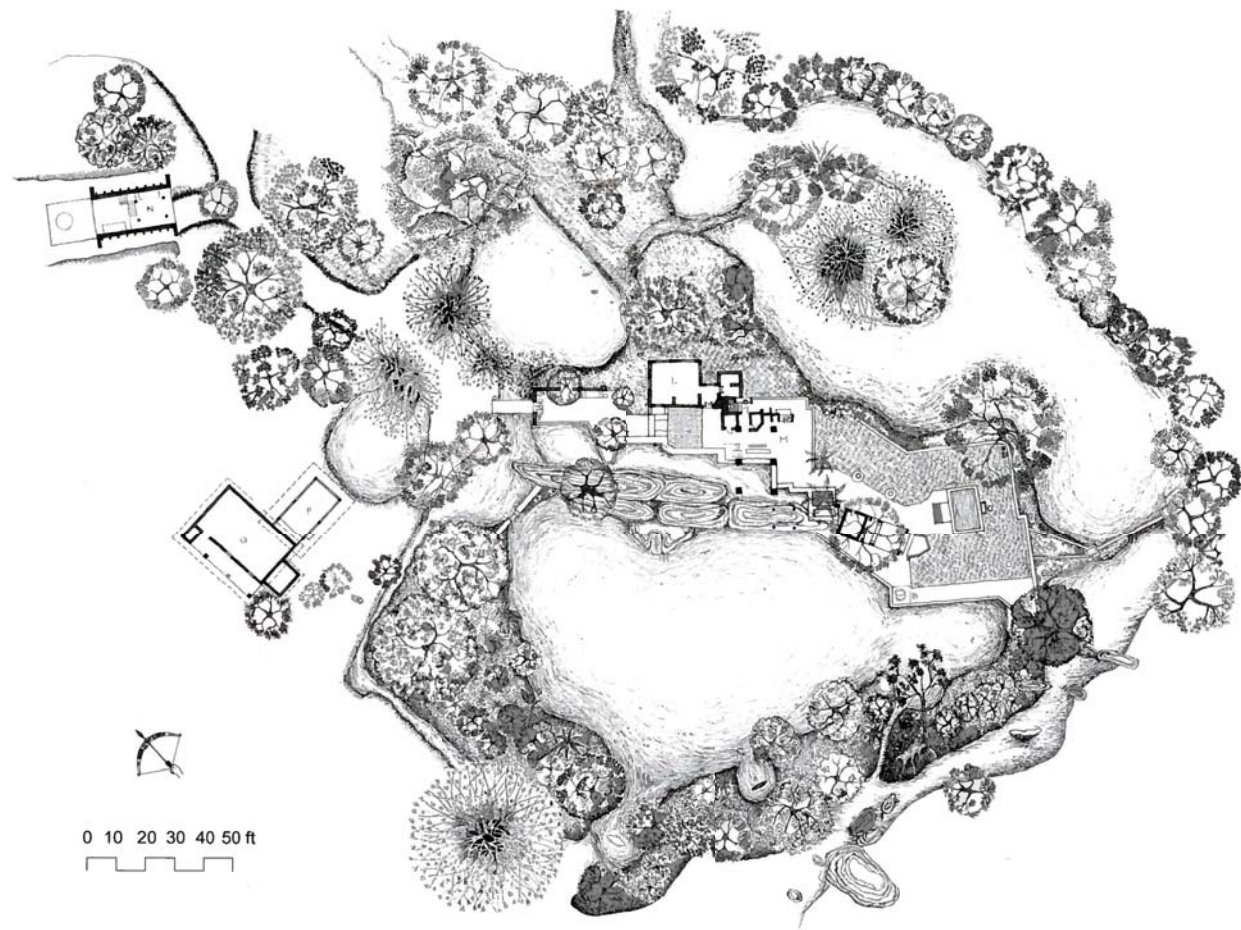


Figure 197: Site plan of Laki's Diyabubula.
 Drawn by: Anjalendran's office.
 By Gayathri, Channa, Faadhi, Kshanika,
 Lasitha, Madhusha, Raveendra & Yasir, 2001.

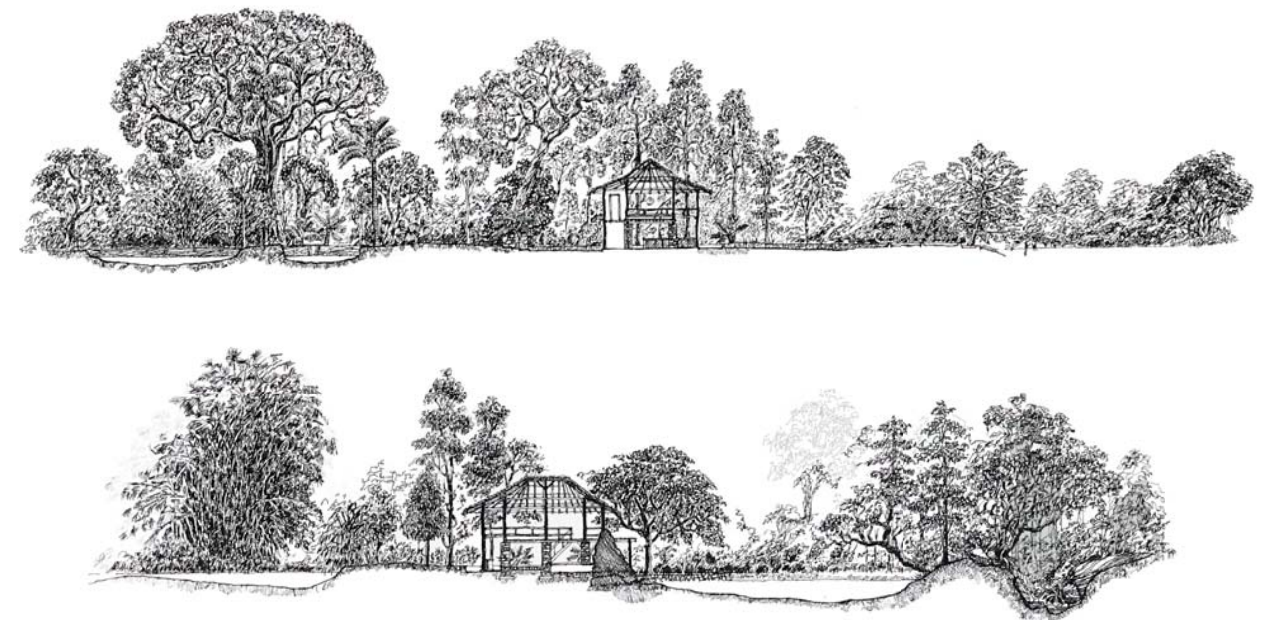


Figure 198: East-west section looking south (above)
 and north-south section looking east (below).
 Drawn by: Laki Senanayake, 1991.

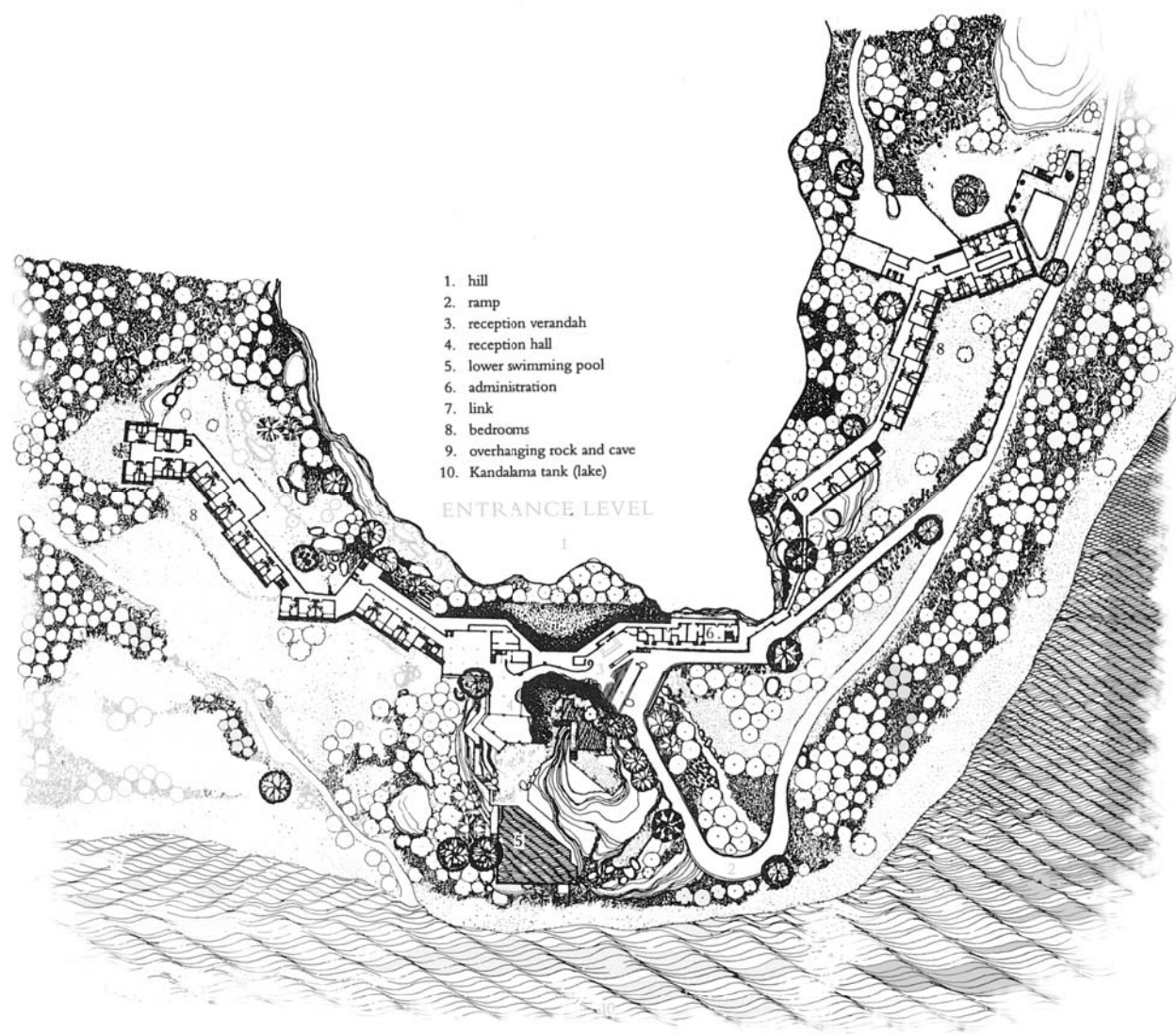


Figure 199: Site plan of Kandalama Hotel with entry level floor plan.
 Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.

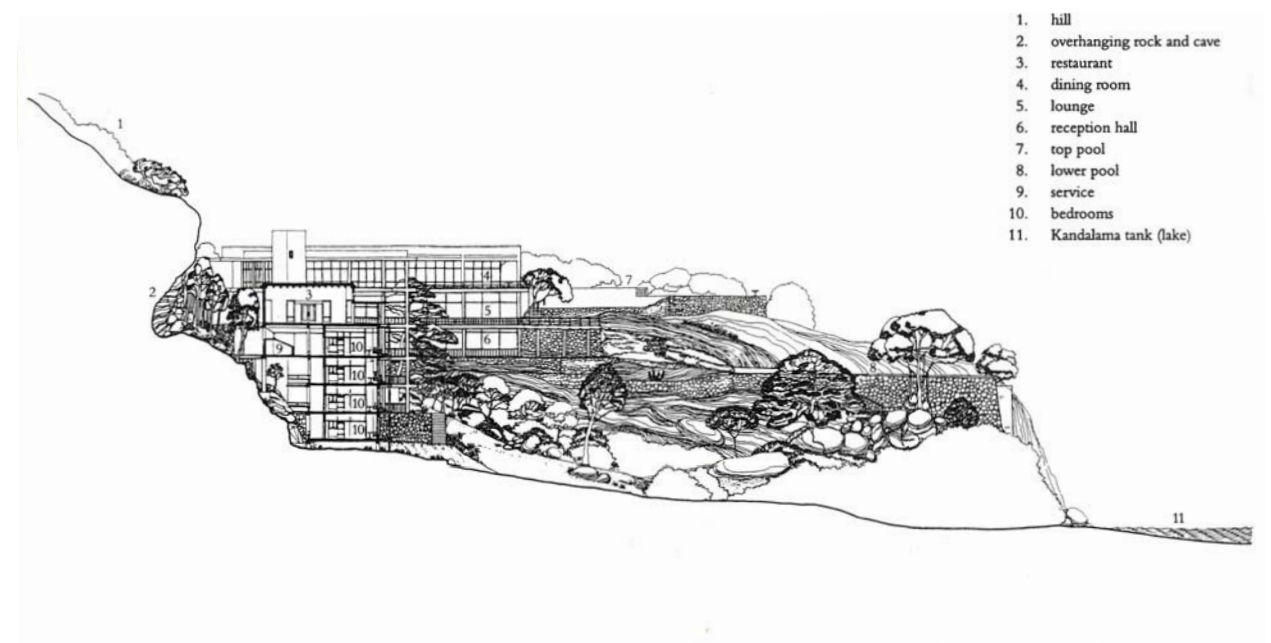


Figure 200: Sectional elevation through Kandalama Hotel showing the relationship of the building to the cliff.
 Drawn by: Geoffrey Bawa Associates.



Notebook IX

Beginning

Figure 201

February 14, 2015

The drive back from Kandalama was my last drive and the toughest yet. I hung onto my drooping eyelids through the traffic as I entered Colombo by evening to return my rental car to its owner. He cranked open the door and read the manual odometer, which had picked up 3000 additional kilometers, and checked the worn tires, which had traversed the country. A local rickshaw driver took me to the Colombo bus station where I caught the next bus back to Negombo.

I savoured the chaos of the bus ride and even the walk from the bus stop, down Canal Road, towards my property. I knew it would be my last walk down that road but imagined myself having done so regularly if I hadn't moved to Canada at a young age. Although I was leaving in a day, I couldn't imagine not walking through this street again. As I neared the property I had visited so many times in my dreams before arriving in November, the monsoon clouds finally cleared and let through the sunshine.



Figure 202: The morning of the Montessori school reopening, Negombo.



Figure 203: Shelves stocked with children's belongings at entry.



Figure 204: The children waiting patiently in the main classroom.

The children were dressed in the school uniform I remembered from my childhood: a folded handkerchief pinned to the school shirt. The morning sun lit the Montessori school and its array of freshly painted colours.

“Hello, good morning,” Emma said to the children in a gentle voice. She had invited me into the classroom where all of the students sat quietly. I stood in the back and Emma waved me up to the front. I walked past the children towards the front of the classroom, remembering how shy I had been at their age. Emma asked the children to look around the classroom. They slowly lifted their sleepy heads and followed her hands as she pointed from one wall to another.

“What’s that colour?” Her energetic voice filled the room. “What about that colour? And that one?”

Within seconds, the children were awake! Screaming the names of the colours as their heads spun around the room. Emma then stretched out her arms towards me and the children’s gaze caught mine. “This uncle from Canada painted your school,” she said and I couldn’t help but laugh at the fact that she had called me an uncle. “Thank you,” she added and began to clap. The children followed.

“Now, what song are we going to sing for uncle?” Emma asked the children. “What song are we going to sing?”

A quiet voice in the back of the classroom whispered, “Out in the Garden.”

“Okay. Out in the Garden!” Emma said enthusiastically. “One! Two! Three!” It felt like the small classroom could not contain the energy from the youthful voices of the children as they sang. Their arms reached out towards the ceiling and the walls as they danced.

*Out in the garden each fine day, with my ball, I like to play;
I bounce my ball, I bounce my ball, I bounce my ball on each fine day!*



Figure 205: Children singing and dancing in the main classroom space.



Figure 206: Children playing in the main classroom space during their recess.



Figure 207: The children holding up the beautiful drawing they gifted me.



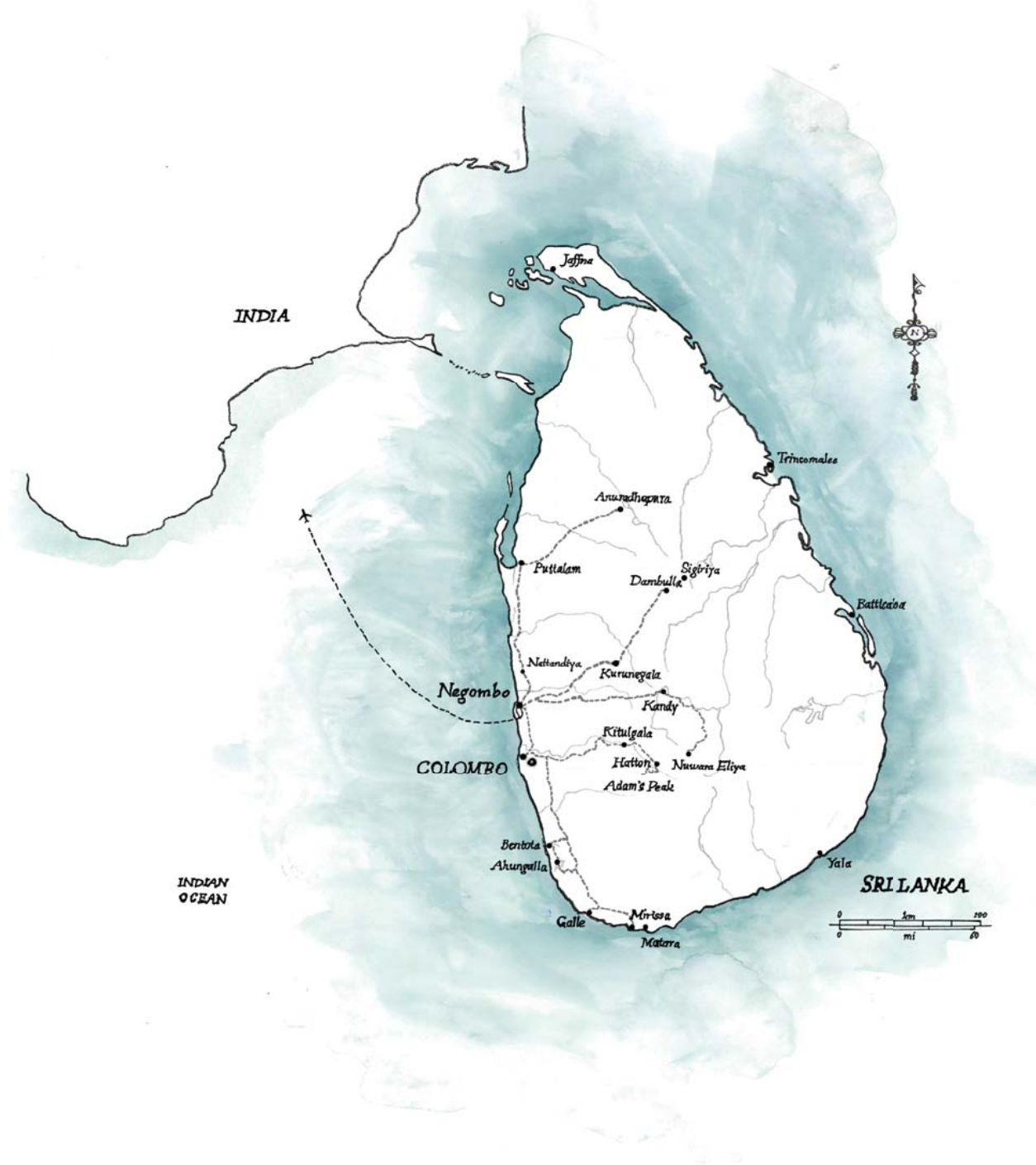
Figure 208: Emma playing with the children on the front porch.



Figure 209 (above): The back of the Montessori school.

Figure 210 (following page): The Montessori school from the street during the lunch break.





Reflection

You must know that there is nothing higher and stranger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Figure 211

While in Sri Lanka, I lived with my aunt and her family in a modest two bedroom home, which bore the weight of the monsoon rains on its simple clay roof. The trees and plants grew thick in the yard, bursting with the sounds of animals and insects, day and night. Simply walking into the flooded yard after a storm was a sensorial feast. The fast rhythm of the world I had known dissipated to the knocking of the rain—life had to forfeit its former pace and submit to the forces of nature. When the rain brought everything to life, I was astonished by the ability of the elements to define my experience of a place. In these moments my senses were at the forefront of my experience. We often took to the deep veranda, where long conversations were born amid the cool mist of the downpour. The buildings I had visited were designed to be entangled with life itself, and in that way, they were an extension of ourselves. In this setting, I felt completely at ease—my doubts and questions regarding my thesis had unconsciously disappeared and my senses were renewed.

Without knowing it, my life in Sri Lanka had extended what I considered to be the boundaries of home, past the walls and into the vast yard. I found myself drawn to the simple aspects of life there, where day-to-day rituals weaved together to form my understanding of the place. The streets I traversed, the homes I inhabited, and the spaces I frequented, all settled within me, and have inscribed their markings upon me. There were many instances when, simply walking through the yard, or speeding along in a rickshaw, I saw glimpses of something insignificant yet so moving. Sometimes it was a beautiful landscape, or a simple yet charming building; other times they were but momentary, like the fleeting clouds of mist that enveloped the hills of Nuwara Eliya. Revisiting these memories, I recall my serendipitous encounter with the Montessori school after hearing the sound of children at play one afternoon, which drew me to rediscover my grandparents' old home. In hindsight, these almost unnoticed encounters were the defining moments of my trip, and have left a considerable impression on me and perhaps my understanding of design.

When I returned to Cambridge, I spent a lot of time observing the river just outside my office. When I heard the rain gently tapping on my window, I wrote most freely, still invigorated by the monsoon rains I had felt half a world away. When the Grand River froze, my thoughts came to a standstill. It occurred to me that my thoughts flowed with these elements. Sri Lanka had taught me that to listen to the river and the rain was to listen to myself. These two elements, like life and time, are unstoppable forces that flow through all things.

I have come to realize that this story has two threads. One is of rediscovering home, and the other is of rediscovering a lost passion for architecture. For the two to unfold in parallel was unforeseen and yet felt seemingly appropriate. In my attempt to reconnect with my birthplace, I rediscovered my affinity for architecture, in the form of light, material, texture and emotional resonance. For me, it took a shift in place and perspective in order for these realizations to emerge: to notice the subtle changes in atmosphere as light entered between the coconut trees; to notice the pensive mood brought about by the rain. I am reminded of the sacred moment when I rang the bell at the top of Adam's Peak, as the sun appeared proudly from the world's humble arc. Its colour swept the entire landscape, with a glow sublime and all-encompassing. All of these moments retain an atmospheric quality that are inseparable from my very idea of that place. They are the most meaningful experiences that I have had, and I take them with me in my pursuit of architecture. I now know that my trip has helped me to understand the place that sensing has in my architectural education.

When I reflect on my trip to Sri Lanka, I find that my earliest memories from that place have deepened my most recent travels there. Now these experiences have also collected within me, and like my childhood memories, both the experiential and emotional findings from my trip will serve as a rich palette for my future architectural endeavours.

This early spring, as I bring my notebook to a close, the Grand River flows freely yet again. The trees have begun to leaf and the sun gently touches the rustic old buildings across the water, where ducks occasionally glide to a stop. I am reminded of the beautiful sentiment by Louis Kahn, that "the sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building."⁵⁵ When I experience this spectacle of light, I am at once here and there: the top of Adam's Peak, the terrace at Kandalama or the front veranda. The Sri Lanka I know now rests somewhere between my body and my memory. It exists as experience, something I have touched and felt, smelled and seen—all of which govern my everyday actions and thoughts in ways so subtle I rarely think of them.

Sri Lanka has captivated every part of me. It has become my inward map, one which I continually traverse. My heart now beats to its very rhythm and serves as my innermost compass, and still trembles when I hear the sound of rain.

NOTES

Notebook I: Sitting

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