Interiors of empire and the tropical modern/critical vernacular home: domestic space and the built environment in South Asia from 1830 to 1990.

At home in the Empire: the colonial interior in India and Ceylon

Post-colonial Architecture in South Asia – a case study of the work of Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka

Background notes

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Living Room, Bawa House, Colombo

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Introduction

The colonial domestic interior in India, Ceylon and the Indian Ocean region generally, sometimes amused or amazed but more frequently dismayed contemporary commentators. British homes in the Indian Subcontinent were described in many written accounts of the period as odd, uncomfortable, barn-like environments, furnished with a motley collection of, often second hand furniture and very often lacking the basic niceties of homes within Britain, such as patterned curtains, wallpapers and softening textiles.

In the early colonial period, Europeans (Portuguese, Dutch, British) lived in fortified enclaves and if these were mostly concerned with trade they were called 'Factories', which were set apart from the local population. Here large houses were constructed, the external appearance of which was loosely based on the designs of neoclassical houses in England. However, the plans of these dwellings differed from those of similar buildings in England and were Indianized**.**

Colonial settlements become secure from attack by around 1800,and the higher levels of that community began to live even further apart from the local population in suburbs or clusters of dwellings in favourable parts of the colonial city. In Madras, for example, a particular type of Anglo-Indian residential dwelling developed during the 19th century which became known as the 'garden house' - a house was located in spacious grounds or gardens which were often filled with tropical fruit trees or set within expanses of open space. As was the case with most houses in India, entry was made directly from the verandah - no hall in the English sense existed. In fact, the largest rooms in the Calcutta houses were referred to as Hall Rooms, although they were in fact the equivalent of the drawing room of the homeland.

In Colombo, Ceylon, during the early years of the 19th century, many British residents inhabited dense urban dwellings, which had been built by the Dutch, the previous colonizers of the island. Some British residents, higher up the administrative hierarchy inhabited very grand mansions, for example James Emerson Tennent at Elie House, Mutwal.

In the main settlements such as Colombo, as the 19th century progressed and the island became more secure, British residents started to seek out the more picturesque and less crowded parts of the town and build bungalows and 2-storey houses. These dwellings also took advantage of the cooling sea breezes which helped reduce the high relative humidity.

Away from the colonial town, in the rural areas of India and Ceylon, Anglo-Indians who were engaged in the cultivation of cash crops such as indigo or coffee or tea, usually inhabited isolated bungalows**,** which were located in on the plains or the hill country.

Colonial domestic dwellings in India and Ceylon built during the 19th century incorporated local features and features developed through European experience of domestic life in the tropics in order to cope with the harsh environmental conditions. The effects of the hot and humid climate had to be mitigated and insect and reptile intrusions kept to a minimum. The indigo planters of northern India lived in reasonably comfortable dwellings but in southern India and the hill country of Ceylon many of the bungalows were located high up and were exposed to the rains of the monsoons. While the indigo planters of northern India lived in reasonably comfortable dwellings, in southern India and the hill country of Ceylon many of the bungalows were located high up and were exposed to the rains of the monsoons.

Magai Bungalow, North India, 1880

The planning of the Anglo-Indian interior, especially in relation to the number and size of door and window openings, was intended to improve ventilation. Keeping cool in the domestic interior was effected in various ways. Many commentators noted the large size and high ceilings in many Anglo-Indian dwellings, features, which were intended to allow for the circulation of air. Measures were adopted to control the ingress of light and heat from the sun. On grander buildings, devices such as sunshades were attached to south facing windows. Venetian blinds were incorporated into doors and windows.

In India and occasionally in Ceylon, large rectangular swinging fans were attached to the ceiling. These fans or punkahs provided additional draughts of air to cool the interior. A variety of local heat-reducing devices was also used within the Anglo-Indian dwelling, including the thermantidote. Other local devices included Tats or tatties – flexible blinds of rattan, fragrant grass or palm fibre – were used on the outside of many houses to cut down the heat and light.

Most bungalows presented a rectangular plan surrounded by a verandah on at least one side, the interior comprising a standardized arrangement of rooms, each opening directly into another and rarely with the inclusion of passageways or hall ways as found in the dwellings of the homeland.

Furnishings

Household manuals advised that textiles were kept to a minimum to prevent them harbouring insects. Commentators such as Colesworthy Grant noted how bare and unfurnished Anglo-Indian rooms were ie they did not have the textiles or draped curtains so common in the drawing rooms of the homeland. However, many British residents could not resist the temptation to drape their rooms in a variety of materials.

New furniture was commissioned by a few very wealthy Anglo-Indians and British residents in Ceylon but the majority was second hand due to the high mortality rate and frequent transfers, many commentators noted 'the floating stock of household articles' which was dispersed throughout Anglo-Indian society. In 1874 Edward Braddon suggested that Anglo-Indians should not go out and buy new furniture but purchase it more cheaply second-hand. He wrote: 'in every large town auctions are constantly taking place, at which second-hand furniture can be picked up.' One noticeable effect on the Anglo-Indian domestic interior of the absorption of specific pieces from among this large pool of furnishing articles was, as some commentators noted, that 'every habititation assumed in some degree the character of a second-hand furniture warehouse or curiosity shop.'

There was a variety of furnishing schemes and arrangements depending on such aspects as the period, social status of occupant, whether the dwelling was located within an urban settlement or in a rural area. The centre of Calcutta, capital of British India, was filled with large, neo-classical style houses. At the very top of the social scale, was Lady Impey, whose husband was chief justice of Bengal. A watercolour produced by an Indian artist in her employ, shows a grand domestic interior with examples of new, japanned furniture made at Patna in the English late 18th century style, a large locally made carpet (Mirzapore). The room contained a large number of window openings, painted Venetians, large number of local servants in attendance, including one European. The furniture is close in style to the types of item found in the reception rooms of the home country and is most probably arranged in the way depicted in order to take advantage of the cooling draughts of air from the swinging fan or punkah**.**

Domestic Interiors in Ceylon

Moving from India to Ceylon, Dr James Paterson made a drawing of 'his first day in Ceylon' in his bare lodgings in Colombo surrounded by his few possessions. The drawing depicts a campaign bed based on a European model or it may even be a European bed; he has a range of chests which act as tables to hold his possessions, his servant completely oblivious to the fact that a snake is chasing a rat along the wall plate!!

The interior of the British Governor's Residence in Colombo, Ceylon (Gov Robinson) was photographed in the early 1860s. In the photograph we see a large drawing room on the first floor with a variety of lighting devices, wall-shades and chandeliers, matting on the floor and examples of locally-made ebony furniture, such as the circular centre table and Bombay Rosewood furniture. The chairs are covered with chintz pattern material, which colonial office records show were in fact ordered from England.

Wesleyan Mission House Interior, Colombo 1880

A photograph of 1880 depicts the drawing room of the Rev James Nicholson at the Wesleyan Mission house, Colombo. The room is furnished with examples of locally-made furniture almost certainly of jackwood following the style of furniture from the homeland. Some textiles have been used as furnishings and there textile drapes to the rear of the image which have been used to screen off another room.

Conclusion: The British in India and Ceylon, during the 19th century, imagined the colonial domestic interior as a protective barrier against the local environment and tried to create Westernized-homes in the Subcontinent were they could reinforce British cultural attributes through the furnishings they acquired and the behaviour engendered through the use of that furniture. However, this process was undercut by continual intrusions of the local, including the odd plan of the dwelling, the mix of furniture much of which was second hand and bore traces of previous ownership, the effects of the local climate in fact the Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Ceylonese bungalow was, a hybrid space, straddling two worlds, neither completely western nor completely eastern but an amalgam of cultural influences that had to be continuously negotiated by the inhabitants.

Post-colonial Architecture in South Asia:Historical context
Prior to contact with the European powers, the island of Ceylon had a long and impressive cultural history. Architecturally, the remains of the ancient cities of Anuradhapura (6-8th centuries) and Polonnaruva (12th century), together with the immense irrigation works in the dry zone, are testament to a rich and distinctive South Asian built heritage. Due to its advantageous location at the cross-roads of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, has been subject to numerous incursions by foreign powers throughout its history. The Portuguese and the Dutch had conquered and settled parts of the island around the coastal regions. In 1796, the British expelled the Dutch and in 1815 subdued the whole island, including the central highland kingdom of Kandy which had resisted previous foreign invasions. The Portuguese, Dutch and British occupiers adapted the local domestic architectural traditions to their own tastes and modes of living.

Geoffrey Bawa (1919-2003) was Sri Lanka's most prolific and influential architect and one of the most important South Asian architects of the post-colonial generation. Born in what was then the British colony of Ceylon, Bawa was the son of a wealthy Muslim lawyer and his wife, a woman of mixed Dutch descent. He came to Britain in 1938 to read English at Cambridge University and study law in London. In the end he pursued neither of these courses. When Ceylon gained independence in 1948 (it became Sri Lanka in 1972), he sailed home from the UK and bought a derelict rubber estate at Lunuganga, near Bentota, with the aim of transforming it into a tropical version of a picturesque European style landscape garden. He embarked on a trial architectural apprenticeship with HH Reid in Colombo. After Reid's death in 1952, Bawa enrolled at the Architectural Association, in London, qualifying in 1957, at the age of 38. He took over what was left of Reid's practice and gathered together a group of young architects and artists to join him in his search for a new, post-independence architecture, tht was connected to the island’s rich built heritage. His group included the batik artist Ena de Silva, the designer Barbara Sansoni, the artist Laki Senanayake, and Ulrik Plesner, a Danish architect.

In the late 1950s, soon after starting work, he acquired a row of four small bungalows in a narrow lane in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, and began to convert them, one by one, into a single house for himself. It was a project that would demonstrate his ability to bring together elements from different times and places in order to create something new and original. Over the years, Bawa used this house as testing ground, creating a group of Under Plesner’s influence, Bawa and his office became more aware of the vernacular building traditions of Sri Lanka and the appropriateness of these

traditions to local conditions. Early experiments in what was known as 'tropical modernism' were tempered by a growing interest in the traditional architecture and building materials of Sri Lanka. The new way of building has been described as 'critical vernacularism'. This led to the development of an architecture that was a blend of both modern and traditional, of east and west, of formal and picturesque, that broke down the barriers between inside and outside, between building and landscape, and that offered a blueprint for new ways to live and work in a tropical city.

Bawa's portfolio of work included religious, social, cultural, ductional, governmental, commercial and residential buildings, and in each of these areas he established a canon of new prototypes.

The **house** Bawa built **for Ena de Silva** in 1962 demonstrated a modern and locally relevant alternative to the colonial bungalow; the rooms turn their backs on the outside world and focus into a large central courtyard, inspired in equal measure by the atria of ancient Rome and by Kandyan manor houses.
The **Bentota Beach Hotel**, of 1970, was one of the first of Sri Lanka's purpose-built resort hotels - offering modern creature comforts in a traditional setting - and served as a powerful inspiration for the many similar buildings that followed.
Bawa's educational designs culminated in his masterly work for the new **University of Ruhuna**, on a coastal site near Matara. Here, a network of pavilions, loggias, courtyards and terraces are distributed across a pair of rocky hills, demonstrating the architect's skill at merging buildings with landscape.
In 1979, Bawa was commissioned to design **Sri Lanka's new parliament** building, at Kotte, on the outskirts of Colombo. Before the project was completed, in 1982, a swamp had been dredged to create an island site at the centre of a vast artificial lake, symbolising the great irrigation works of the classical period. Seen from a distance, the asymmetric composition of copper-roofed pavilions seems to float from a series of stepped terraces that rise out of the water, creating an effect both gentle and monumental. There are many vernacular references in this building.
In 1990, working from his Colombo home, he began producing a steady stream of fresh designs with a small group of young architects: in 1996, he completed the **Kandalama Hotel** on a site looking across an ancient reservoir towards the distant citadel of Sigiriya.

Bawa's two personal properties hold the key to understanding his work: the garden at Lunuganga, which he continued to fashion for almost 50 years, and his town house in Colombo. The two function as complementary opposites: the town house is a haven of peace, locked away within a busy, and increasingly hostile, city; in contrast, Lunuganga is a distant retreat, challenging the ocean horizon to the west and the hills to the east, reducing a wild landscape to a controlled series of outdoor rooms.

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Seating Area, Bawa Bungalow, Lunuganga

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