

DESTINATION

# A TROPICAL LEGACY

BY ELIZABETH KERR

Sri Lankan master architect Geoffrey Bawa's tropical modernist legacy is burnished with the completion of the Anantara Kalutara Resort



The Anantara Kalutara Resort, sited between a lagoon and the Indian Ocean, was idle for 15 years after the death of architect Geoffrey Bawa





Terracotta tiles, pivoting windows, ceiling fans and plantation furniture all preserve the tropical feel of the main building which was part of Geoffrey Bawa's original design

One of the world's great train journeys skirts Sri Lanka's west coast, hugging the shore where the Laccadive Sea meets the land. It's a natural wonder that ultimately must be abandoned for the inland trip towards Bentota and a place where nature gives way to the built environment. Perched on Dedduwa Lake, Lunuganga Estate, with its renowned garden, stands as one of Sri Lanka's most popular attractions, as well as one of the best-known works of architect Geoffrey Bawa (1919-2003). Its influence is palpable in all of his work, which we can thank for the pitched roofs and harmony with nature that are now staples of tropical hospitality design.

A cinnamon plantation under the Dutch in the 17th

century and a rubber plantation under the British in the next, the six-hectare Lunuganga is now a public garden and seasonal hotel after dozens of other incarnations. Fresh from law school, Bawa purchased the abandoned estate in 1949 and it was Lunuganga's sprawling main house, surrounding tangle of greenery and cool, serene lakeside position that inspired him to study architecture in London. An ongoing project for Bawa over the next 40 years, Lunuganga became something of a laboratory, a place where the influential architect would hone his craft and define his signature tropical modernism, a hybrid of his Architectural Association education and his home's monsoonal climate.



ABOVE Products reflecting local materials, crafts and heritage were used throughout the interiors as Sinhalese accents

BELOW The Upper Deck bar of the pitched-roofed main building containing the Kalutara lobby and lounges provides views of both ocean and lagoon







ABOVE Interiors of the villas at Kalutara by DDN Design employ natural materials, clean lines and vivid injections of colour using local textiles

BELOW Contemporary batik banners throughout Kalutara are by Ena de Silva, a friend of Geoffrey Bawa and credited with re-establishing Sri Lanka's batik industry



"[Bawa] did not really give a particular precedence to the modernist project over other good architecture," says architect Channa Daswatte at MICD Associates. "He once said, 'Why would a good Palladio building be better or worse than a good Le Corbusier one, or vice versa?' He questioned the relevance of the modernist project in Asia, creating an approach to architecture that not only accommodated the monsoon climate and environment in which he lived, but also its culture through the materials and skills available to him, marrying them with the best of the spatial and ideological aspects of modernism. This is what tropical modernism is all about."

The Sri Lankan Parliament building, commissioned in 1979, effortlessly combines Bawa's modernist, geometric leanings and the tropical space the building occupies: asymmetrical, interconnected pavilions rooted in



New rooms were created by Channa Daswatte of MICD Associates following Geoffrey Bawa's design approach but were adapted to contemporary hotel needs

indigenous architectural forms and constructed with local wood and stone comprise the halls of power, seemingly floating on a man-made lake and surrounded by dense foliage reminiscent of Lunuganga.

The Kandalama Hotel in Dambulla, finally completed in 1992, exploits its ridge-side position overlooking a reservoir by aping the rock it's on before vanishing into the surrounding jungle.

Bawa's work can be found across the region, in almost all of its luxury resorts, and Daswatte recently ushered an unfinished Bawa project to completion in Kalutara, about 40km from Colombo. Commissioned in 1995, the Anantara Kalutara Resort is sited on a lagoon between the Indian Ocean and the Kalu Ganga river, with waterfronts on both. It sat idle for 15 years after Bawa's death until Daswatte, a former Bawa student, took up the challenge. Of the original plans, the main building with its colonial

Dutch gable roof, breezy arrival hall, lobby lounge and upstairs bar remains, with Daswatte taking several pages from Bawa's book to come up with a design for the library, ultimately modelled after Daswatte's personal study.

The modern, 141-room hotel had to accommodate a site divided by a public road. Daswatte's goal was to stitch the two halves together using three-storey walls to cross the gap. As 1995 is a lifetime ago in hotel terms, changes were required to guest rooms. "New rooms needed to be built to replace the original villa-type design that had been suggested by Bawa, and the room block on the beach side," says Daswatte. The beachside rooms were irreparably damaged by 2004's catastrophic tsunami and subsequent neglect. However Daswatte says, "The new designs follow the approach Bawa has taken in similar circumstances in other hotels. I adapted them to the needs of the Anantara and the site."





LEFT & ABOVE Local motifs and crafts with modern polish

## “A SYNTHESIS OF TROPICAL CONTEMPORARY AND TRADITIONAL SRI LANKAN ELEMENTS”



The resort features a Geoffrey Bawa library that imitates designs of the architect's residence

The result is a perfect blend of colonial scale, historic inspiration and Sri Lankan aesthetics. With long corridors that recall a Roman villa such as Hadrian's at Tivoli, and its discreet location, Anantara Kalutara's design means service and guest movement never crash into each other. It's complemented by typically Sri Lankan open pavilions, or *ambalama*, traditional resting spots for weary travellers, with natural light and ventilation spilling between the colonnades and open sides of common areas.

Guest rooms have an understated, eclectic tone in line with guest and brand expectations, in what DDN Design's Dipika Dharmadasa calls a "synthesis of tropical contemporary and traditional Sri Lankan elements". Dharmadasa's natural materials, clean lines and vivid injections of colour for room and villa interiors cleaved closely to the spirit of Bawa's original exteriors. "The gentle progression of space, especially the subtle transition from indoors to outdoors, was a key feature in Geoffrey Bawa's designs. The spatial sequence of the original building was in line with the same concept," says Dharmadasa, adding that for soft furnishings, "A material palette inspired by local heritage was introduced to bring in a sense of intimacy and warmth" to guest rooms.

Despite the Roman inspiration and Dutch ceilings, local heritage informs Anantara Kalutara without tipping into kitsch, with Sinhalese accents enriching the interiors and imbuing the property with its strong sense of place.

Medieval motifs referencing traditional culture dot the rooms on sliding panels, wall and floor coverings, lighting and furniture, while batik textiles by Ena de Silva honour history with a contemporary edge. "In keeping with [Bawa's] ethos, the guest rooms were designed to ensure that one would always capture the breathtaking views of the ocean or lagoon, whether relaxing in bed or unwinding in the bath," says Dharmadasa. ■

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