

# **The Politics of Culture and the Problem of Tradition: Re-evaluating Regionalist Interpretations of the Architecture of Geoffrey Bawa**

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines regionalist interpretations of the work of the late Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's most celebrated architect. After a brief period practising law, Bawa turned his love of buildings and gardens into an exceptional 45-year career in architecture, gaining widespread international recognition. The architecture that emerged from Bawa's practice in Colombo has been termed 'eclectic' and is said to reflect the varied backgrounds of the artists and designers with whom he worked. Although sometimes labelled a 'romantic vernacularist' or 'tropical modernist', Bawa is best known as a 'regionalist' because of the way he attempted to blend local building traditions with modernist aspirations.

The aim of this paper is to re-evaluate Bawa's architecture as an example of 'regionalism' and show how regionalist interpretations of his work have been constrained by a form of dualistic thinking that has its foundations in the ideology of Western modernity. In their preoccupation with the modern/traditional dichotomy, we argue, critics have failed to acknowledge the extent to which his work is bound up with local struggles over identity in the context of a long-standing and violent ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Our intention here is not to tarnish Bawa's well-deserved reputation, but to reveal alternative readings of his architecture from outside the canon of critical regionalism to demonstrate the fundamental inadequacies of this perspective.<sup>1</sup>

## **Regionalism**

'Regionalism' is a slippery term and there is no clear consensus about its meaning, however, many authors have acknowledged that debates about regionalism in architecture are united by a common concern with the 'problem' of tradition. Citing the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, Kenneth Frampton began his essay, 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism', by identifying the resolution of tradition and modernity as the central paradox of our time. Advocates of regionalism promote the revival and reinterpretation of tradition as an oppositional strategy. For Frampton, regionalism offers "the sole possibility" of resisting the "universal Megalopolis", or that "ceaseless inundation of a place-less, alienating consumerism."<sup>2</sup> Lefaivre and Tzonis point to the writings of Lewis Mumford as the source for their concept of 'critical regionalism'. Mumford broke with earlier romantic or nationalist forms of regionalism by advocating an architecture that embraced local traditions while simultaneously engaging with the global, universalizing world. "With Mumford", Lefaivre maintains, "regionalism becomes a constant process of negotiation between the local and the global."<sup>3</sup>

One of the key characteristics of regionalism is the way it attempts to revive and reinterpret local building traditions to achieve a synthesis with modern architectural forms. Curtis states, "at its best, regionalism penetrates to the generating principles and symbolic substructures of the past then transforms these into forms that are right for the changing social order of the present."<sup>4</sup> For Buchanan, regionalism "must be a genuine hybrid, a totally new configuration which may include a remembrance of the past, but transformed or framed in terms of its significance for today."<sup>5</sup>

It is apparent that in any discussion of regionalism certain assumptions regarding tradition are taken for granted. Tradition is associated with the past. It is objectified, or assigned a 'thing-like' quality, equated with a definable 'essence' or core of customs or beliefs located in the specificity of recognisable physical objects. These are the objects of the vernacular – "pre-industrial, collectively produced, crafted rather than manufactured, sensitive to the landscape." The vernacular is typically represented as stable, immutable and pure, "fragments of a remote and distant past that have survived into the present."<sup>6</sup> Because vernacular architecture is seen as stable and passive, it is equated with tradition and represented as increasingly marginalised in a rapidly changing world.

Such assumptions about tradition should not be accepted unquestioningly. They are grounded in a form of dualistic thinking that derives from European intellectual history, the discourse of modernity in particular. Modernist discourse created a basic classificatory distinction or discontinuity between concepts such as rational and irrational, civilised and uncivilised, or 'modern' ideas and social formations and those of 'traditional' societies. The word 'modern' acquired favourable connotations of improvement, progress and desirable change. To authenticate the notion of modernity it was necessary to construct a problematic 'Other' existence, a homogeneous counterpart against which modernist claims of reality could be compared and understood. This entailed setting spatial and temporal boundaries and distancing the 'Other' from modern humanity; distancing occurred in space with the construction of the concepts of 'primitive' and 'indigenous', and it occurred in time with the construction of the 'past' and 'traditions'.

In recent years, debates about 'tradition' have moved beyond these familiar, but limiting, modernist dichotomies. Hobsbawm and Ranger describe how many supposed 'ancient traditions', enacted as part of national culture, royal or imperial rituals, were actually "invented" relatively recently. Claims of continuity with the past, they argue, can afford authority to otherwise questionable practices and institutions in the present.<sup>7</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod proposes a re-interpretation of the concept of tradition. She argues that traditional environments have never been isolated and so they have never been 'pure' expressions of a unified culture. In place of the static notion of 'tradition', she prefers the more active concept of 'traditioning', which implies that while traditions may draw on the past, they are ultimately created in the present for present needs. She also warns against the concept of 'tradition' being used to reinforce or maintain 'traditional' forms of dominance.<sup>8</sup>

From a post-structuralist perspective, representations of tradition reflect contemporary concerns and purposes and are therefore expressions of and a source of power. Invariably only the most powerful groups are entitled to select and redefine 'traditional' cultural forms. Eggener has observed that "critical regionalism is itself a construct most often imposed from outside, from positions of authority."<sup>9</sup> While the concept is often applied to the analysis of post-colonial architecture, as in the Sri Lankan case, critical regionalism actually belongs to a global discourse about architecture that originated in the West and is still dominated by Western institutions and critics. As such, it tends to reflect Western concerns and sensibilities.

Advocates of regionalism champion cultural diversity and the particularities of the local, but only within a constraining dichotomy framed by the ideology of modernity. In post-colonial contexts, issues of tradition and identity are regularly a source of conflict. While cultural conflict at a global level has frequently fanned the flames of local identity politics, particularly during the colonial era, in the present, local ethnic rivalries often loom larger than

any global politics. Notwithstanding this fact, in regionalist interpretations of post-colonial architecture, the global/local or West/non-West relationship is always presented as the key site of struggle. In order to fix and reify the opposition between Western modernity and its 'Others', regionalists tend to reduce complex and culturally diverse peoples and places to a simplistic cultural image, which confers upon them a single homogeneous identity in opposition to the West. Multifaceted, local identities and cultural conflicts are neglected or submerged within simple dualisms that reflect this underlying bias. Regionalist interpretations of the architecture of Geoffrey Bawa are a case in point.

### **Bawa as a 'Regionalist' Architect**

Brian Brace Taylor, one of the principal chroniclers of Bawa's work, rejects the regionalist label as a useful descriptor. "The term 'regionalism' as applied to architecture, although fashionable in intellectual circles these days, is both nebulous and misleading", he claims, "[It is] impossible to define beyond some common characteristics such as materials or climatic conditions."<sup>10</sup> However, in the international context, critics and admirers alike have judged Bawa's work largely in terms of how it resolves the conflict between modern and traditional building forms, universal and local identity, and for many his architecture is an exemplar of critical regionalism.

Lim and Tan propose four strategies for evoking tradition in regionalist architecture. Bawa's work, they claim, is an example of 'extending tradition', or, "using the vernacular in a modified manner" for the purpose of raising the status and value of tradition.<sup>11</sup> Jayawardene agrees, arguing that the significance of his work "lies in the act of raising both the formal and the popular indigenous traditions from the degraded status assigned to them in the colonial era, and in the creation from them of a formal architectural language which could once more receive national patronage."<sup>12</sup>

The argument that Bawa created a new architectural language based upon Sri Lanka's building traditions combined with a modernist approach to design is widely held and has led many authors to praise his work as a fitting expression of national identity for Sri Lanka. According to Robson and Daswatte, Bawa gathered around him a group of artists and designers, who "came together to discover ways of making and doing things which would be new and vital and yet *essentially Sri Lankan*."<sup>13</sup> In the work of Bawa, Knott argues, Sri Lanka "has been offered an architectural language that is its own, being both modernist and regional. It is rich in the culture and history of the country yet it sits within a contemporary, global context."<sup>14</sup>

The manner in which Bawa is credited with the revival and revalorisation of Sri Lankan building traditions suggests that the nation as a whole can be defined in terms of a common tradition. Scott maintains that it is "due to the work of Geoffrey Bawa, [that] the country's excellent tradition of building has been preserved and legitimised."<sup>15</sup> He created a style, we are told, "related to the surviving peasant vernacular, but suited to the larger scale of contemporary building programmes."<sup>16</sup> Brawne argues that Bawa's architecture "is deeply entwined with a sense of national status and cannot be separated from such considerations... By making the vernacular respectable," he claims, "there is thus hope that an indigenous but interrupted tradition will continue and eventually perhaps even flourish."<sup>17</sup> Again and again the same assumption is made, that the Sri-Lankan nation can be defined in terms of a shared set of traditions or a single, essential identity.

### **Sri Lanka: A Multiplicity of Identities**

So, to what extent is the Sri Lankan nation united by a common culture or tradition? The island has provided a setting for numerous migrations, invasions and colonisations. Questions of culture are complex; it is problematic to even try to define the population in terms of distinctly separate ethnic identities. Today, just over two thirds of Sri Lankans call themselves Sinhalese, and are mainly Buddhist. The majority of the remaining inhabitants are Tamils, who are predominantly Hindu, but there is also a significant population of Muslims and a community of Eurasians of Dutch and Portuguese descent, a consequence of the period of European colonisation.

Ethnicity and religion are not the only significant markers of identity in Sri Lanka. Divisions are often drawn *within* ethnic groups on the basis of geography, distinguishing between so-called 'Indian Tamils' and 'Sri Lankan Tamils' as well as between highland and lowland Sinhalese. Caste has been another important distinction; caste hierarchies are common to both Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Linguistic and class differences also have played a significant part.

Despite these diverse, mutable and often overlapping identities, today ethnic politics tend to be seen in terms of a bipolar struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamils. This conceals a story of the shift from a common history of pluralism and assimilation to an ethnic conflict underpinned by histories and traditions constructed to support one side or another. Relations between the minority Tamil population and the majority Sinhalese were sometimes tense during the colonial period, but they deteriorated rapidly after independence, eventually leading to the bloody and protracted civil war out of which the country has only just emerged.

The civil war in Sri Lanka has generated a body of academic literature attempting to trace the causes of communal conflict in the country. Much of it focuses on debates about the ethnic identity of the first settlers on the island in the 4th or 5th century BC and the consequent claim to cultural superiority that this implies. Recent literature aims to overturn the widespread assumption that the Sinhalese and Tamils are two different and mutually exclusive peoples, Aryans and Dravidians, with different roots in the Indian sub-continent. Many authors now argue that strong collective identities in Sri Lanka were invented only during the nineteenth century by colonial officials preoccupied with the mapping and classifying of native populations according to the laws of racial science.<sup>18</sup> These authors have demonstrated that prior to the nineteenth century the boundaries and definitions of cultural identity were more fluid and that historically the Sinhalese and Tamils shared many cultural and religious practices through multiple migrations and intermarriage.

Prior to the achievement of independence in 1948, Tamil and Sinhalese populations frequently were united by their opposition to Western modernity in its various colonial manifestations and their support for a trans-ethnic Ceylonese nation.<sup>19</sup> Since independence, however, the politics of identity in Sri Lanka have been directed more by local ethnic divisions than by global oppositions. Left-wing parties and politicians, who had worked to bridge ethnic divides prior to independence, were increasingly marginalised in the post-colonial context as democratic politics were captured by a Sinhalese elite pursuing a narrow ethno-nationalist agenda. The Sinhalese attempted to construct the Sri Lankan nation state by aligning territory with a singular notion of identity. According to Guneratne, "Sri Lankan national identity has been seen as being more or less equivalent to Sinhala-Buddhist identity, and the minorities have been left to accommodate themselves to this circumstance as best they can."<sup>20</sup>

Successive governments justified discriminatory policies as a means of righting supposed imbalances created by colonial authorities' preferential treatment of Tamils. Sinhala was made the national language of Sri Lanka in the 1950s as part of a wider 'Sinhala Only' movement. Policies governing university admission processes also were changed in a way that disadvantaged Tamil applicants.<sup>21</sup>

Simultaneously, the Sinhalese attempted to establish a cultural hegemony through the 'revival' of 'national' forms of art, fiction, film and theatre. To underpin this nationalist endeavour there was a concerted effort to 're-discover' and restore traditional Sinhalese architecture and archaeology. For example, Sri Lankan president, J. R. Jayawardene, spent huge amounts of money restoring and preserving archaeology in the so-called 'cultural triangle' that united Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy. The hybrid Tamil-Sinhalese history of these ancient sites was erased in official readings of the archaeology. Jayawardene viewed the Tamils who inhabited and ruled these cities as intruders. He saw himself as the lineal successor to 193 Sinhalese Buddhist kings and emperors of Sri Lanka stretching back over two thousand years. His stated aim was to create a *dharmistha*, or 'righteous society', as was said to exist during the reign of the Buddhist king Asoka.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary architecture also became the focus of this revival; Robson describes post-independence architecture as 'uninspired' because "in deference to the spirit of independence public buildings were expected to make overt reference to Kandyan and classical Sinhalese motifs."<sup>23</sup> For example, Sinhalese Buddhist symbols, such as Pun Kalasa (a symbol of prosperity), Sandakada Pahana (moonstone), and lions and guard stones, can be found throughout the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya, designed by the Sri Lankan architect Shirley de Alwis from 1949 onwards. Most of these buildings also incorporate the distinctive double pitched, hipped Kandyan roof. Similarly, the Independence Hall, designed by Wynn Jones in 1953, is a reproduction in concrete of the timber-framed audience hall in the temple complex at Kandy and also uses the hipped Kandyan roof.<sup>24</sup>

Thus as Guneratne points out, "the symbols of the Sri Lankan state are exclusivist symbols. They are symbols that do not serve to incorporate ethnic minorities into the fabric of the society. They remind minorities and, in particular Tamils, that they are, if not second-class citizens, at least not quite equal with the Sinhalese."<sup>25</sup>

### **Cultural Politics and the Architecture of Geoffrey Bawa**

It is clear that in this context the generic regionalist notion of 'Sri Lankan tradition' is inadequate to explain Bawa's architecture. We need to look more closely at the local influences upon his work.

Some authors have argued that the eclectic nature of Bawa's influences demonstrates that his architecture was more than a simple fusion of indigenous cultural symbols and modern architectural forms. They claim his work was a true hybrid and contained a wide range of cultural references. Others have placed Bawa within a "long-standing building tradition in Sri Lanka which is an amalgam of a wide range of influences: Buddhist architecture from India, building methods of the Mediterranean brought by Muslim Arab traders and Portuguese colonists, Dutch and British modifications of European styles."<sup>26</sup>

Regionalists tend to focus on the formal characteristics of Bawa's architecture – its relationship to the surrounding landscape, the quality of space and light, the structure of buildings and the use of materials – and ultimately to assess it in terms of its connection with

tradition and modernity. However, Bawa's work could equally be assessed in terms of the social context in which it emerged and the social order which it in turn supports. According to Shanti Jayawardene, "Bawa's clientele was circumscribed to less than 5% of the population and comprised the urban upper middle classes. His architecture, it may therefore be deduced, took little or no account of the building needs of the remaining 95% of the Sri Lankan people."<sup>27</sup>

To attack Bawa for the narrow class basis of his work some may say is unfair, since the same criticism could be made of many architects practicing within Sri Lanka and elsewhere. However, Jayawardene's observation is significant for that very reason. It highlights a dilemma that is fundamental for the architectural profession in general; as Kim Dovey has observed, the profession's legitimacy depends on community service, but its members are beholden to those with land, power and money. Architecture and power intertwine not only in the reproduction of class relationships; "authority becomes stabilized and legitimized through its symbols" and the built environment offers a subtle but effective means for powerful groups to ground identity and extend their dominance in the cultural arena.<sup>28</sup> So where is Geoffrey Bawa's architecture situated in Sri Lanka's identity politics?

If we look for the influences commentators point to in specific elements of Bawa's work, there are numerous references to Sinhalese building traditions. Robson acknowledges that many of the characteristics of Sinhalese classical architecture "are equally features of Geoffrey Bawa's architecture."<sup>29</sup> Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial architecture and contemporary Western building forms are also cited as significant influences, but not Tamil architecture. Neither Bawa nor his critics cite Tamil architecture as an influence.

This is a reading that is shared by Tamil architects we interviewed in Sri Lanka.<sup>30</sup> When asked to comment on the extent to which Bawa's work represents Sri Lankan culture and tradition, one interviewee replied, "Sri Lanka is a multicultural nation and Bawa's work only represents part of this." Another architect explained in greater detail:

Being a Sri-Lankan Tamil citizen and having qualified as an architect in 1983, I became very conscious of the one-sided nature of architecture being practiced in Sri Lanka... I believe Bawa's work represents only a fraction of the cultural forms and traditional practices existing in the country... The development of his work has been at the expense of other vernacular influences and their cultural values, such as those of the Tamil and Muslim minorities. Consequently, his work has contributed to the growing marginalisation of these groups and their cultural values.

It is important to investigate the cultural influences underlying Bawa's work because of the difficult context in which he practiced architecture, not because of any sectarian views he might have held. Bawa himself was of mixed ancestry, part Dutch Burgher, part Ceylonese Moor or Muslim, and he had no overt political affiliations (although his biographer, Robson, acknowledges that he was sympathetic to the United National Party and to President Jayewardene, who was a family friend and former client).<sup>31</sup> It is not our intention to pass judgement on Geoffrey Bawa as an individual or to ascribe to him ethnic prejudices that he clearly did not have. The problem here is not even that Bawa failed to embrace or acknowledge the building traditions of a particular ethnic group. Multiculturalism is not an architectural imperative and, given Bawa's reluctance to comment on his architecture in theoretical terms or to discuss specific influences, it is difficult to say with certainty what

directed particular design decisions. The difficulty arises when others attempt to characterise his work as an expression of Sri Lankan tradition without acknowledging fully the complex and contested nature of tradition in the country or, more problematically, when obvious Sinhalese motifs are simply equated with signifiers of national identity.

When it comes to issues of national identity, Bawa's Parliament Building at Kotte is the key work to consider. Interpretations tend to emphasise the extent to which the traditional Sri Lankan references in the Parliament "were incorporated within a modernist framework to create a powerful image of democracy, cultural harmony, continuity and progress."<sup>32</sup> More than anything else the Parliament is identifiable through its cascading roofs, which were designed to be seen on the approach to the site from a distance of two kilometres. Various commentators, including Bawa himself, have pointed to the roof form as an eclectic cultural symbol.<sup>33</sup> But Bawa's references were far from harmonious or universal. The roof chosen for the capital complex was not a neutral or national architectural form, but a derivation of the Kandyan roof favoured by Sinhalese revivalists. Bawa himself also acknowledged the influence of Sinhalese monastic architecture in the asymmetric layout of the buildings.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, Lawrence Vale points out that, "in many ways, the capitol complex may be seen as a temple to Sinhalese nationalism and to the rule of President Jayewardene whose government commissioned it." The complex was situated at Kotte to reinforce a mythological history about a Sinhalese heartland close to Colombo. Kotte was a Sinhalese royal capital during the fifteenth century. The Sinhalese associations are further reinforced by the masterplan for the capitol complex as a whole, which envisaged a series of Buddhist meditation centres and a park for the promotion of indigenous culture. Vale further states: "The only culture that seems to be considered indigenous in the iconography of this masterplan is that of the Buddhist Sinhalese."<sup>35</sup>

How have regionalist authors reacted to charges that Bawa's skills as an architect were put to use in sectarian struggles over the definition of national identity? Most do not even recognise that the revival and reinterpretation of tradition might be problematic in the Sri Lankan context. It is simply assumed that the Sri-Lankan nation can be defined in terms of a shared set of traditions or a single, essential identity. Robson is one of the few authors who has responded to Vale's evaluation. He dismisses criticisms about Bawa's use of the Kandyan double pitch roof on the basis that this roof form is not unique to Kandy or the Sinhalese, but can be found elsewhere in Asia. He also challenges Vale's interpretation of the significance of the Kotte site arguing that the Kotte Kingdom was ruled by kings of mixed Sinhalese and Tamil descent at a time when distinctions between the two communities were not as clear cut as they are today.<sup>36</sup>

Robson is correct about the prevalence of the double pitch roof and the complex nature of identity in ancient Sri Lanka. However, he misses the point that buildings and places have no inherent or essential meaning, their significance derives from the associations that they have for particular communities of people in the present. Regardless of historical 'truth', the Kotte site and the Kandyan roof form have a definite significance for contemporary Sinhalese and, as Vale shows, the discourses and historical narratives that were constructed around them at the time of the commissioning and opening of the Parliament Building did form part of the wider Sinhalese struggle for national hegemony.

Later, Robson defends Bawa's work, by stating that the politicians' motivations did not necessarily reflect Bawa's intentions to create a design that was "an inclusive expression of

the aspirations of the whole nation."<sup>37</sup> However, architecture does not arise out of the intentions of architects alone. It emerges within particular relations of power, shifting or indeterminate patterns of cultural encounter, and "complex and uneven sedimentations of the past and present."<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding his eclectic aspirations, like many architects before him, Bawa was clearly beholden to those with land, power, and money. And in the context of post-independence Sri Lanka, that meant his architecture was invariably caught up in the Sinhalese struggle to establish a national cultural hegemony. Because regionalists fail to recognise or seek to background the complexities of the cultural political context in which Bawa practiced, the manner in which they interpret the role of tradition in his work is not only superficial, but also risks reinforcing this cultural hegemony.

## Conclusion

Regionalists' reluctance to acknowledge or explore the local cultural politics surrounding Bawa's use of tradition in architecture is understandable. It is through the lens of the ideology of modernity and the conceptual limitations of dualist thinking that regionalist representations of Bawa's work have been framed. Critics emphasise various oppositions that his work purportedly resolves, but always understood in terms of some unified, ahistorical and essentialist notion of Sri Lankan identity. Any *local* conflicts that might have taken place over the revival and reinterpretation of tradition in architecture *within* Sri Lanka are rendered invisible, concealed by an overarching narrative about a larger conflict between local tradition and global modernity. Critics generally do not ask whose traditions are being represented, how they were selected or what local interests they might serve.

We suggest that the dualistic mindset of regionalist discourse must be abandoned in favour of a more meaningful conception of hybrid architecture that fully acknowledges the local as well as the global politics of identity. However, we acknowledge that the word 'hybrid' is just as problematic as others we have examined in this paper. For example, the term has biological origins and suggests a species that combines genetic influences from two or more 'pure' sources. A more complex and relevant, definition of 'hybrid' refers to "the relation between situated subject and objects. Here perception itself is a hybrid condition." In this sense a 'hybrid' is a continual construction, a product of interaction between an object and a viewer. "Thus, one object can sustain numerous readings, each different from the next, but ultimately linked through their common participation in systems of power mediated by class, gender, race, ethnicity, religious belief and national identity."<sup>39</sup>

We believe this post-structural conception enables a more complex reading of Geoffrey Bawa's architecture, one that acknowledges the possibility that it could be simultaneously oppositional in the global context yet oppressive in the local. Once again, it has not been our intention in this paper to tarnish Geoffrey Bawa's reputation, but to reveal alternative readings of his work from outside the canon of critical regionalism to demonstrate the fundamental inadequacies of this perspective.

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