



THE ARCHITECTURE OF PARADISE:

Above: The Pool court of the Bentota Beach Hotel:

Far Left: The "Paradise Garden" of the Neptune Hotel:

Channa Daswatte discusses the interpretation of the tropical idyll in the architecture of tourism in Sri Lanka:

Tourism, since it became an important part of the national economy in the late 60's was until the beginning of the 1980's, when the garments industry took over, the number one foreign exchange earner in the country. Major investment in the tourist infrastructure was made with a great deal of it being on a whole range of new resort buildings. The architecture of these buildings have in many ways attempted to capture the spirit of tropical life and the exotic nature of the island. Some have done this more successfully than others whilst a majority of our infrastructure has unfortunately descended to unconvincing international kitsch. Particularly in the last few years many

of the hotels that seem to cater to the mass tourism and package market seem to be interested in creating an architecture and imagery that looks better in the brochures than in reality.

One of the most important issues of the architecture for tourism is an understanding of what is to be sold. While the biggest attraction for visitors is the beauty of the country, its beaches and its cultural relics, the available accommodations seem to play an important role as well. Two types of tourist come to this country, the ones on package tours and others who are Free and Independent travellers known as FITs in the trade. Package tours are very well organised and are paid for in

the home country and there is a particular standard that seems to be expected by the operators of these tours. Most important among these are a standardisation of accommodation and facilities to match with other similar destinations around the globe. This seems to have a direct effect on architecture where attempts are made to copy almost directly the features that are found in hotels elsewhere that are already admired by the trade. This is unfortunate, since instead of interpreting local features to fit in to the greater more fundamental standard, they are seen as superficial elements to be copied. The point that seems to be missed is that the standards seem to refer to a particular lifestyle that is



expected and not architectural or interior details. Many of our recent hotels do not cater to a lifestyle that is generated by our own culture and life, but simply copy the details of another.

FIT travellers on the other hand seem to come most importantly for the country and then look for a luxurious or simple lifestyle depending on their needs. The notion of luxury however seems to change for many of these tourists. To many coming to an exotic destination itself is a luxury, and accommodations that manifest luxury in terms of space and immaculate service seems to be in order. Particularly for the highest paying clients simplicity and good taste seem to have the greater appeal over air conditioning, elaborate detail and interiors.

In the late 60's the government of Ceylon, embarked on an ambitious programme to develop the tourist industry. In a report in the Pacific Travel News of May 1969, an ambitious programme was announced.

"The Ceylon tourist plan has engendered government action on substantial tax, tariff, and allied concessions for tourist investments and outlined for major areas for basic development: Colombo and the environs; 2) the south coast region from Mt. Lavinia to Hambantota, which boasts lovely beaches distinctive villages, the 17th century city of Galle and game sanctuaries; 3) Trincomalee,

the east coast city with one of the world's largest natural harbours and exquisite beaches, and 4) the ancient cities circuit comprised of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya."

Almost thirty years later the tourist industry has seen dizzy heights of success in terms of tourist arrivals and great depths of despair with the ongoing war in the country virtually emptying out the hotels and resorts. However, much of the programme set out above has been achieved in some way or other. The ancient cities circuit has been developed as the cultural triangle with UNESCO assistance with some being declared world heritage sites. The south coast has been developed as a string of hotels exploiting the beaches and centred around the resort towns of Bentota and Hikkaduwa. Galle is a world heritage site, but much of the 'distinctive' villages have disappeared, thanks to planning requirements for developing and widening the Galle Road. Colombo too has seen its fair share of development. Trincomalee and the east coast alone remain underdeveloped due to the ongoing civil strife there. Of all the changes brought about in the landscape of this country through tourism the most direct evidence are the large number of hotels that have been built in and around these areas.

Although much has been done in investment in the hotel infrastructure, there does not seem to be a consistent

Above Left: Bentota Tourist Village

Above Right: Serendib

Sri Lankan image that is recognisable in these buildings. Only some of the architecture ties back to the culture and landscape of this country in any way at all. Many of the early buildings done during the time of restrictions on imports seem to have a consistency that has arisen out of home grown solutions being put to use. With unrestricted imports, the flavour of the architecture has changed. Many buildings show an acute lack of resolution and craftsmanship coming from the lack of understanding of the materials used. There also seems to be a greater reliance on these fancy materials and finishes rather than pleasurable spatial experiences.

The beach resorts were the first to be addressed in the ambitious programme of 1969. Hitherto, the only architecture of travel had been the Government rest house. Built all over the country as places for government officers on official tour could be housed, the earliest of these are records of these used by the Dutch. Since then the most beautiful sites in the country, if not occupied by an ancient temple, came to be occupied by a rest house. The rest house provided the basic facilities for, in its later days, anybody to relax after a journey, or unwind for a few days in simple yet elegant surroundings. The ubiquitous verandah



Top Left: Taj Exotica

Top Right: The Lanka Princess Hotel

Below: Serendib Court Yard

was a must in all these buildings to while away some time looking out either at a breathtaking view as at Ella near Bandarawela and Hambantota, or at the antics of fishermen as at Negombo, or birds as at Polonnaruwa. Apart from these the only other accommodation were the grand hotels,

like the Mount Lavinia, Galle Face, the Grand Oriental, Queens and the New Oriental.

The first of the resorts to be developed was the Bentota Tourist Village. The development here envisaged not just a hotel but an entire complex of about 80 acres. It was to have a variety of accommodation, activities and entertainment features planned.

Over twenty five years later the resort is at least architecturally complete with the opening in late 1997 of the Taj Exotica hotel.

The Hotels in the complex include the Ceysands hotel on the spit of sand between the river and sea the Bentota Beach hotel, the Serendib in the style of an old rest house the Lihiniya Surf and the Taj Exotica on the crown of the hill on the extreme south of the complex.

The village itself, built on the landslide of the railway track was complete with its village square with railway station on one side, banks, police stations and post offices etc., and its long arcaded shopping areas and restaurants set on





Club Villa



Taprobana

lush lawns amongst groves of araliya trees. Designed by the firm of Edwards Reid and Begg, the complex uses a simple architectural language that emulated the folk buildings of the southwestern coast, but modified to accommodate the new needs and uses.

All the hotels in the Bentota resort have been carefully planned and designed with reasonable control. The building on this site seems to have happened in three stages. The first was the Bentota beach hotel and the attendant village complex immediately followed by the Serendib hotel. All this in the late 1960's and early seventies. The mid-seventies saw the Lihiniya Surf and the Ceysands hotel with the last being the Taj Exotica completed in 1997.

Architecturally the earliest was perhaps what captured the tropical paradisiacal spirit most convincingly and established a style of Sri Lankan architecture that was to be imitated in various ways albeit in sometimes watered-down versions. The Bentota Beach Hotel is built on the site of the old rest house. It attempts to capture the spirit of the long-disappeared old fort of Bentota that guarded the river entrance with its stone base, vaulted entrance and cavernous passages. A timber stairway leads up into the reception proper on the first level and the eye is drawn to the exotic batik ceiling by artist Anil Gamini Jayasuriya

and Ena de Silva. The pool in a courtyard reflecting old plumeria trees provides a calm central focus around which all the activities of the building are arranged. Through this the eye is drawn out to the distant horizon. The whole sequence of arrival is a masterful orchestration of movement that heightens anticipation of the final goal of the holiday maker which is the exotic 'paradise' beach with its gently swaying palm trees and warm sea. The main rooms of the hotel with its fully collapsible fenestration captured the spirit of the gracious life on verandahs in the tropics. The initial thirty rooms on three levels above the main reception with their successively cantilevering balconies make it a significant landmark at the entrance to the resort. The rooms themselves with terracotta floors and timber shuttered fenestration leading onto timber-railed balconies capture the spirit of the Sri Lankan existence and were designed to be used originally even without air conditioning.

The Serendib on the other hand achieved a much more homegrown and simple architectural style, and is most like a resthouse. A simple long almost warehouse-like building completely whitewashed and set on a lush green lawn with coconut trees has for many epitomised the tropical idyll. Arriving at a large porte-cochère off the Araliya-lined street, the entrance frames

a long cool terracotta-tiled corridor with a clearly framed view of lawn, beach, sea and sky. The corridor passes various courtyards profusely planted with tropical vegetation. This central axial view is crossed at the reception by the main corridor of the hotel that leads to the two levels of rooms. The pool terrace on the southern end of the main building is surrounded by a lounge, another three-storied block of rooms with lattice screens for privacy and pavilion-like coffee shop.

A recent addition to the Bentota resort complex has been the club intersport sports complex, next to the Bentota Beach hotel. With its stone base and high-pitched roofs it complements the existing hotel and adds to the riverfront of the Bentota Ganga. High-roofed rooms sit on the tops of the rampart-like base that cleverly hides the squash courts and other sporting activities from the outside, making it appear less sports complex and more pleasure pavilion.

Another is the Taj Exotica on a spectacular promontory overlooking two beaches brings '5 star' luxury to the beach. The rooms are draped over the Hillside of the promontory rather like a Hill town, and is well camouflaged from the beach by well-planted garden terraces. Like all Taj hotels however, the allusion to local culture is more applied decoration than

what is inherently part of the architecture:

The rest of the resort has developed as a series of low cost guest houses that crowd the rivers edge on the northern shore.

South of the resort, over the southern promontory and on the quieter beach, are a series of small guest houses that also capture effectively tropical living. Two in particular are of note. One is the conversion of an old ruin by Geoffrey Bawa as a beach side residence to complement his country estate of Lunuganga close by. Now run as the sixteen roomed Villa Mohotti Walauwe, this is a series of courtyards and passages leading to large and distinctive bedrooms, each different from the other and with their own toilet courtyards. There is no air conditioning in any of the rooms and

Triton Water Court

this hotel has come to epitomise the ideal tropical retreat for many, considering the number of similar properties that have come to be on the south western coast. The other such complex is the Taprobana, also a small complex of a few rooms laid out on a narrow plot of land, with a clever sequencing of space that uses the site effectively to give an illusion of more space than there actually is. Again brick and mud painted plaster walls with simple tiled roofs over large verandah spaces that looking through other such spaces at lawn, coconut trees and sea capture the spirit of outdoor living.

North of Bentota on the coastal stretch from Beruwala to Aluthgama are another interesting typology of hotel. Each on a plot of fairly rectangular plots between Galle Road & the sea. Many use the room blocks to create a periferal wall on other side forming a central garden. This range of what can be called the 'paradieso' garden hotel, range from the sublime to the kitsch.

But, what they all do is literally shut out the hustle and bustle of the world outside and create a separate world within the walls. The best of this type of hotels is the Neptune - 1974 by Geoffrey Bawa. Using a simple language of white plaster walls, half round tile roofs & Terracotta floors to create buildings that are essentially two cloistered arcades overlooking a central garden. The Garden itself is intriguing as it manages to be inform whilst still retaining a formality that ties the whole together. The central Pool, is raised and cascades inwards from the seaside into a pool partly inside the dining room, with a flat-roof forming deck on top. These are the focus of the whole garden composition, either side of which are formally clipped low trees that give shade to lie in around the pool: a sweep of lawn beyond the pool takes the garden to its forth side which in the sea & horizon. The whole composition is completed by strategically placed Coconut & Araliya (Fiagipani) trees.





Tangalle Bay Beach

A more formal version of this type of hotel is the recently built Lanka Princess Hotel: where the whole composition is based literally on a paradise garden of the moghuls with a central watercourse of ornamental pool with fountains and swimming pool.

Further South the Hikkaduwa resort was developed. Starting as the oldest of Sri Lanka's Beach resorts Hikkaduwa has developed as a string of low cost hotels, rooming houses and restaurants with only one luxury property. This hotel has been designed as a notion of tropical building, in France, and replaced the old coral gardens hotel which was in effect an improvement and extension of the Hikkaduwa rest house that occupied that site before. Its low roofed verandahs and white plaster exterior extended the rest house architecture to accommodate the needs that a more organised tourist trade.

Most of the other architecture in the resort is of a very *ad hoc* nature which gives it an almost frontier feel. The architecture is generated by highly ingenious solutions to practical problems and design ideas that range

from the sublime to the abominably kitsch. Although it caters mostly to the cheaper end of the market, it manages to capture the imagination as a vibrant tourist town that has engulfed and taken over the sleepy little fishing village that was Hikkaduwa.

The architecture here is of three types. The conventionally run big hotels, all with conventionally designed rooms with minimum space possible, but build close enough to the sea for the compensatory sea view. This typology includes the reception off the Galle Road that leads into a lounge on the sea side, a small garden if at all and then the sea and sand, with coral reef beyond. All the other hotels in this category are simple blocks of rooms, with a few decorative elements in the interior that capture the local flavour. Local handlooms and furniture are a predominant part of the décor.

The second typology are the small rooming houses or inns. Here accommodation is provided at extremely low prices and is therefore popular with the younger tourist and even local holiday maker who come

there for the beach. Although architecturally these are not significant, they make perhaps the greatest social contribution to the local scene. Being essentially rooming houses they live in symbiosis with the third type of architecture which are the restaurants, beach bars and shops. Here is where much of the life in this popular destination is to be found. Here too the most innovative design ideas using home grown materials and technology. Rather like strip in Las Vegas or the Galle Road in Colombo, architecture is seen as a means of attracting clients to each of these places and in itself becomes advertisement. The creation of 'atmosphere' seems to be of prime concern, with various devices used to have low lighting in the evenings and intimate space, yet open to the sea and wind.

This kind of popular imagination put to use to create an ambiance rather than a particular architecture is also found in other places. The most significant in this respect is the development at Unawatuna, just south of Galle. Here an even smaller scale development has taken place to create a very vibrant and

attractive beach resort. Several attempts made by the authorities to control this development within planner and architect designated lines have ended in failure. This is evidence that truly vibrant and independent communities cannot be easily subdued by imposition of regulations once the action has taken place. It also necessary to understand that environments, tourist or otherwise arising from community action are quite different to those that arise from planned developments. The contrast is quite apparent when one looks at the Bentota resort and Hikkaduwa or Unawatuna.

Outside the government designated resort areas too the tourist building industry has been active with the south west coast becoming a virtual wall of hotels from Beruwala to Koggala. Many of them follow a utilitarian approach to architecture with no real attempt to be conscious of aesthetics of site or of tropical lifestyle. Basic concrete frame and plate glass with a great reliance on decoration to try, though unsuccessfully to capture the spirit of place.

Most of the recent hotels however tend to follow the styles and finishes of international resorts that have no relevance to the topics or to the place. Decorative concessions are made to the culture of the country, and the most important consideration in design seems to be the attractiveness of the photograph of the interior of the room that appears in holiday magazines in the countries where these are marketed.

The exception to this is the Triton Hotel, with its now classic entrance, which provides the grand illusion of the sea sweeping in to the lobby and beyond to the jet lagged tourist as he arrives after the nightmare journey down the Galle Road. Its long walks to the room are made pleasurable by courtyards and terraces. The simple bare finishes and its cool ambience has made the Triton a much emulated piece of architecture as it almost



Kandalama

effortlessly bridges the gap of modernity and tradition.

There are also two very convincing example of a modern movement inspired hotels. One is the Tangalle Bay Beach Hotel by Valentine Gunasekera in the south eastern coast. The hotel proper occupies the crest of a beautiful promontory with the bedrooms draped down the sides of the hill coming down to the sea. The whole complex has a form reminiscent of a beached ship and the hotel signage and naming of spaces attempts to reinforce the impression. Billowing

shell concrete roofs and walls and machine age staircases gives this hotel a decidedly nautical air.

The other such hotel that holds its own is the Hunas Falls hotel by the firm of Selvaratnam and Perera. The stark lines of this white painted hotel provides an effective contrast to the breathtaking scenery of the Hunasgiriya range in the central hills. Built partly off the ground, this hotel has the classic modern movement aesthetics of planer form, picture windows and the almost nautical hand rails and fixtures. Unfortunately it has been recently

decorated internally in a style inappropriate to the architecture.

Also close to the foothills in the cultural triangle area, in overtly modernist, but inevitably personal style is the Kandalama Hotel by Geoffrey Bawa. With the construction of this hotel, environmental issues were brought to the fore in the construction of any building in this country for the first time. Built on the edge of a 3rd C reservoir, the government decision to allow construction on this historic site was challenged by various environmental groups and social organisations concerned with the effects of this building on the fragile tank ecology and surrounding agricultural communities. After a period of suspension of work, permission was finally granted with strict rules governing both construction and functioning of this 160 bedroom luxury hotel. The state of the art sewage and water treatment plants recycle a major proportion of the water. This irrigates the extensive roof terraces planted with indigenous plants and grass reducing thermal load so as not to disturb the

thermal currents used by birds of prey resident in the area. A few years after its opening the concerns for the environment has been recognised by several international organisations by the hotel being nominated for various awards. Architecturally the austere almost monastic building with its minimalist structure simply acts as a belvedere from which to observe the remarkable landscape. Architecture facilitates without being in the way of the beauty of the surrounding environment.

Across the lake from the Kandalama, is a quite different hotel, the Culture Club. This belongs to another typology of hotel that is popular in this country – the cabana or individual villa type hotel. Here large central buildings serve as a focus for the bedrooms that are scattered around the grounds in individual or duplex villas.

One of the best examples of this genre however is the Sigiriya Village. Designed using the simplest vernacular structures and set in exquisitely landscaped gardens designed by Bevis

Bawa, this complex manages to capture some of the tranquillity of Sri Lankan village life.

Earlier on, in the mid 1960's, architect Minette de Silva's attempts to create an environmentally friendly architecture that rose out of the landscape has unfortunately not survived. Of the small cabins built for a tourist complex near the 5th C site of Sigiriya, only one remains. However the ideas that were explored there are relevant, particularly in this age of environmental tourism. A recent project in Ehetuwewa in the Kurunegala district attempts to capture the spirit of this attitude. Although the architecture occasionally tends to the kitsch, it creates a convincing stage set of a dry zone Sinhalese village adapted to the needs of foreign visitors. The Ranveli Holiday Resort close to Negombo manages to capture the tropical mood using rustic material and a low density planning.

The Lodge Habarana, another dispersed hotel takes inspiration for its planning from the paved pathways and double platform buildings of Ritigala,



'The Lodge,' Habarana

the nearby forest monastery. The simple architecture, in its superstructure, inspired by the colonial architecture of the Dutch, blends well with the beautiful and spartan forest garden that enfolds it.

Of hotels inspired by the past, perhaps the most convincing of recent times is the Tea Factory, which is the sensitive conversion of an old disused Factory on the Hethersett Estate near Kandapola. Though a series of careful interventions that would make any victorian engineer proud, the old factory has been given a new lease of life. It is also what is perhaps one of the most convincing attempts at conservation for a positive reason in the recent past. A recent extension to

the old Grand Hotel in Nuwara Eliya has also managed to keep the spirit of the old building and add to the old English ambience of that part of the town.

Looking at this overview of some of the most significant buildings for the tourist trade in the past 30 years one comes across a variety of styles and issues addressed. There has been an attempt to evolve a Sri Lanka tradition of hospitality architecture. The two most significant generators of form are site and language. The thoughtful reuse of historic and vernacular models have resulted in some very pleasurable buildings. However these represent a very small proportion of the tourist buildings in this country. A majority of

them make no concession to environment or culture except in a very superficial way. At a time when many of the older buildings are being destroyed in the name of development, the stock of new buildings which will represent the country in the eyes of foreign visitors do not seem to have any consistent quality or image. Most buildings now tend towards the internationalist image of over-decorated sheds as seen in some other parts of the world. Whilst celebrating some of the good work that has happened it is also time that thought is given to achieving a better quality of well crafted and articulated buildings that can become a significant part of our cultural legacy.



Tea Factory: