

# AT KANDALAMA: AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY ARCHITECTURE ?

BY CHANNA DASWATTA

To claim that the controversial hotel project in Kandalama is an environmentally friendly architecture could sound a cliché. The pros and cons of the project at the level of environmental policy has been argued about in other flora and in the media. The implications of the presence of the hotel in the location overlooking the ancient Kandalama reservoir is contestable and will be in the future. Whatever the social and political implications of that presence, its architecture and the intentions behind it are arguably environmentally friendly.

Usually an environmentally friendly architecture is one that builds in the environment with what is accepted as a sustainable scale and of sustainable

material. Small is considered good and the use of naturally occurring materials with an allusion to the vernacular tradition of a particular geographical location, even better. Yet, Geoffrey Bawa whose buildings are usually recognisable by some of these virtues (1) has built at Kandalama a flat roofed building several stories high. In what is possibly the most 'natural' of the sites he has built on, in an area steeped in the history of the land, Bawa abandons the way of building he has been recognised for and adopts a totally new language. This more than anything else is the greatest concession to making the architecture environmentally friendly.

Given the complicated needs of a 162 roomed luxury hotel, the building has been concentrated on the least possible



The cave-like entrance.

ground area without compromising its essential function as a belvedere for observing the beauty of the natural landscape around it. The site itself, at the base of a rocky eminence in the jungle is full of dramatic rock formations and ancient trees. The place is a haunt of monkeys and many birds of prey who use the thermal currents above the rocks to fly. The overriding influence therefore was to restrict the hotel to an existing clearing from a previous use as a chena by surrounding villagers. Even here, most of the building stands on giant pilot, so as not to disturb the natural flow of rainwater and the growth of vegetation. The flat roofs with natural endemic vegetation goes a long way in not changing the thermal balance of the area too much. Only at the entrance and the public rooms does the building cut dramatically into the rocky saddle that is a high area between two flat areas on which the room blocks are built. Here in the public rooms the hotel is at its most organic. The existing rock formations dictating the shape of the cave-like entrance and the rock walled tunnel that leads from the reception to the main public lounges. The elemental forms and constructs of the site becoming the walls and floors of some of the rooms. Outside, geometric lines of pools and terraces cut across the natural lines of the rocky outcrop.

Once inside, the building virtually disappears, becoming a series of vertical and horizontal silhouettes that support the horizontal planes of floor and roof, the essential elements of shelter. Highly polished stone floors, reflect the sky and water outside creating an illusion of these vertical supports coming out of the very landscape. There is no decoration, nothing to distract from the natural surroundings. The building is stripped down to an architecture that is present only to create a series of visual sequences that move the visitor around the hotel, everytime unveiling a different aspect of the dramatic landscape. The straight line geometry of the structure bringing it into sharper focus.

The felicitous incidents that are so much a part of Bawa's architecture, here engages directly with the immediate environment of the site. Huge rocks stand in lobbys suggesting

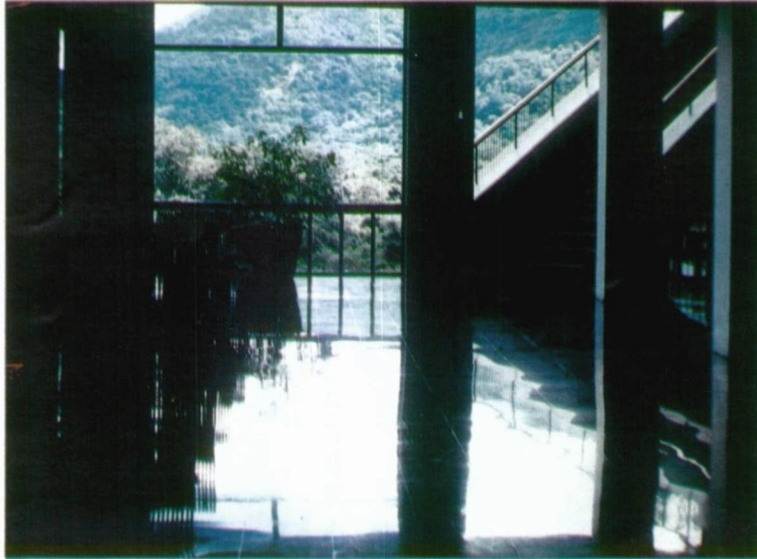
the potency of the environment, the undercroft of the dining room becomes a rock garden where a dramatic rock formation is seemingly held back on a delicately folded concrete retaining wall. One of the staircases starts on top with a spectacular windswept view of the lake and descends to twist and turn around a boulder that appears in the stair hall on the lower levels. The link between the two wings of rooms

becomes a delicate arboreal walkway with the structure reduced to a series of vertical supports for floor and flat roof. Like all of Bawa's buildings this too is firmly rooted in the idea of place (2). Here the focus however is not on any vernacular or other tradition, but on an architecture that recedes in the view.

Any building is essentially an intrusion on the environment. That is its very



**Rock walled entrance tunnel in the public rooms**



**Reception area.**



**The outside reflected on the polished stone floors.**

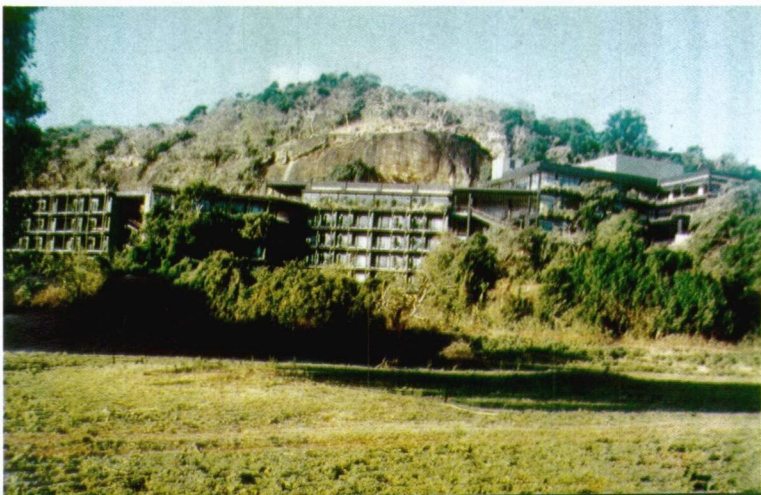
**The geometry of the pool in the landscape.**



**Bedroom.**



**The building rises seamlessly out of the environment.**



essence – to change an environment to suit a human purpose. Usually they not only simply change the environment, but the architecture brings attention to the buildings as objects that represent the socio-political reasons for those changes. At Kandalama one of the reasons for the existence of the building on that location is the environment. Bawa overcomes this paradox by creating an architecture that rises seamlessly from the environment, holds its own and stands back to let the environment in. At every place in the building the environment asserts itself by its presence either visually or in material form affecting the structure and form of the building and how people move through it. This is its greatest virtue as an environmentally friendly architecture.