



PERCEPTIONS OF PARADISE

By **CHANNA DASWATTE**

“and from Seyllan to Paradise according to what the natives say after the tradition of their fathers is a distance of forty italian miles so that, tis said, the sound of the waters falling from the fountain of paradise in heard here”.

*Frair Marignolli
14th C Papal emmisary to the
Great Khan of Peking*

Being thus close to the real thing, from Adam down the ages many have considered the shores of Sri Lanka the first eden. Living in paradise has generated its own quality of architecture. Sometimes to attempt to capture its essence in a microcosm of space and sometimes simply to provide barest shelter taking into account the generosity of the climate. Here are two contrasting examples, where a foreign resident captures the essence of paradise in the restoration of an old

town house in the fort of Galle, and the other a well known architect provides shelter on a magnificent site overlooking a Southern bay.

When Charles Hulse found No. 25 Rampart Street in the Fort of Galle, it was being used as a rooming house. In spite of the plyboard and hardboard partitioning, he was quick to recognise the generous proportions of the house that lay behind. A decision was made to buy the property and make it into the second house for himself and a friend. This was in 1987 and Charles had already been in Sri Lanka 14 years in a self-built beach house that lay across the harbour from the old fort. Like many others they had been lured to these shores by its ancient promise of paradise.

The transformation of No. 25 did not take time. By simply tearing down the

partitions the true nature of the generously proportioned 19th century semi-detached town house was revealed. All that needed to be done was to simply repair the damage to the old fabric and put down uses to the spaces of the classic Sri Lankan town house of the 17th – 19th centuries with its four layers of space from the road to the back garden and the side wing on one side of it. Old plaster was repaired, antique terracotta floors revealed, and rotting timber from neglected stairs and door and window shutters replaced, and the whole painted in a uniform white. The many roomed hostel became an elegant 3 bedroomed town house.

The house as is today shows a sensitivity to the use of space for qualities of proportion, light and shade and its position in the spatial configuration of the house.

The entrance into the verandah from the street is through a low walled garden. The direct view through the house to the back garden gives the visitor the first promise of paradise.

The light and airy front verandah is used for anything from extended farewells and entertaining tradesmen to sewing cushions and curtains and framing pictures! This room gives into the high, cool sitting room. The light in this room is muted during the day by the verandah acting as a filter. The high ceiling and low windows trap a layer of insulating air, making it an ideal retreat on warm afternoons. Parallel to this and also opening into the verandah and to the sitting room is a library, which is much brighter as it opens onto the side garden and dining room as well. The ideal place to read.

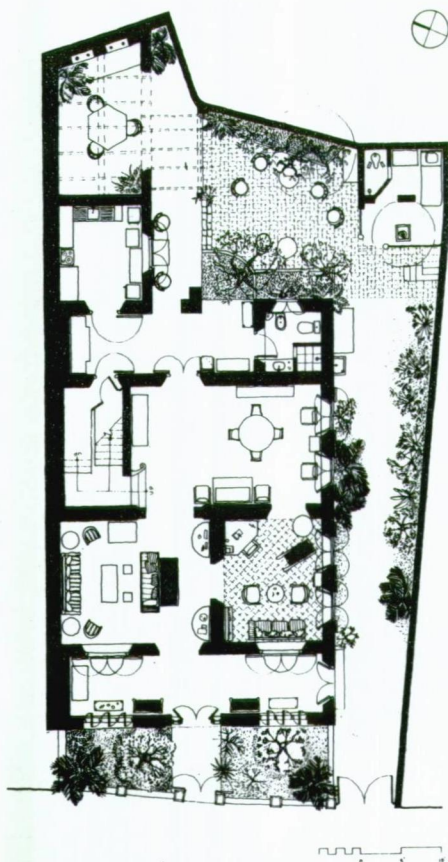
The next layer of space is the large Dining room, almost the same size as the sitting room, but with more light as it also, like the study opens into the side garden. At the other end of this space the old staircase leads up to the

bedrooms. Beyond is the fourth layer that is the verandah with a small guest toilet tucked in at one end and the pantry opening out on the other. All these areas have white painted floors where old terracotta was not found. This not only makes the rather dark spaces lighter, enhancing the tropical feel to the place, but also sets off a very good collection of mostly antique Sri Lankan furniture and brings out their sculptural qualities.

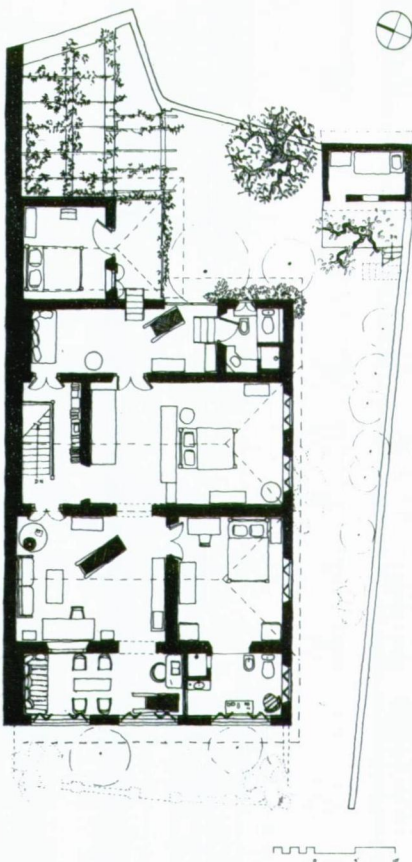
The upper floor is arranged in the same four layers as on the lower level, since in all 19th C town houses the structural logic follows through to the roof. The stairs arrive at the space above the dining room. This large space is divided into landing and guest room by the ingenious use of a cupboard made up from old doors. A large arch leads onto the space over the sitting room to the right, another sitting room and study, and through onto the upper floor verandah enclosed by traditional louvered windows. The magnificent view of the sea over the old Ramparts make this the ideal place for



Above Left: The white floored garden
Above: Entrance door with a promise of paradise:
Below Left: Plans and Elevation to the street



Ground Floor



First Floor



Elevation



Left: The cool white floored dining room opening into the side garden.

Below Left: The verandah of the near garden with the exposed roofwork over grown with plants.

Below: The living room

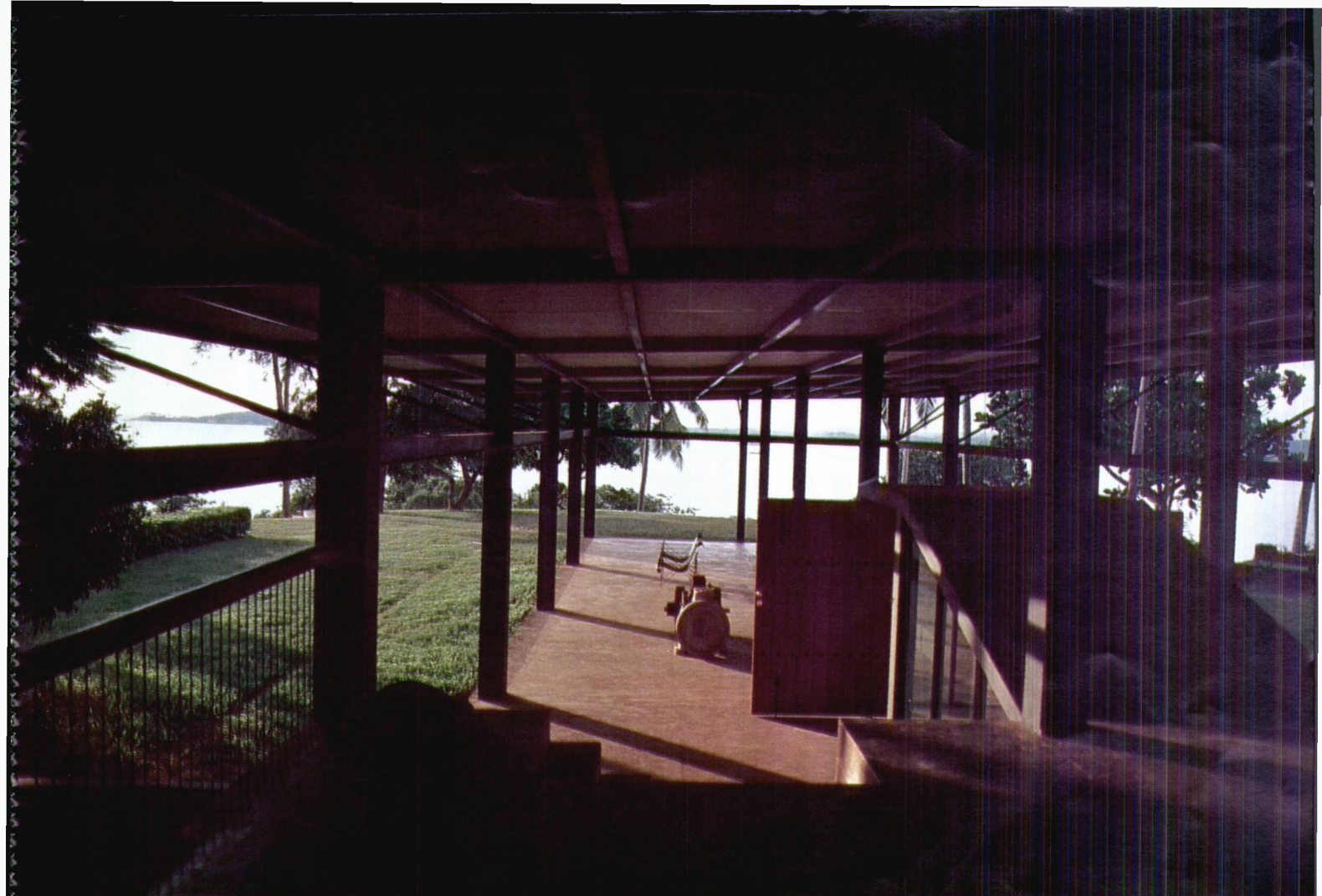
Right: The covered shed with landscape beyond.



contemplation and writing which is the owner's chief occupation. At the side garden end of each of these spaces is a master bedroom which incorporates a toilet in the enclosed verandah. Here the beautiful boarded floors have been restored to glow gently with a simple wax finish.

To the left of the stair landing, steep steps lead onto the upper back verandah, with a guest toilet over the one below and another bedroom over the pantry. The open balcony that leads into these rooms is engulfed by planting from the small garden below.

The postage stamp sized garden is the piece de' resistance of this house. With its white floor that continue the whiteness of the inside, the feeling is that this is another room in the house, except with a roof of foliage and sky. This feeling of openness and enclosure is heightened by leaving part of the old kitchen wing that was single storied, without tiles to become an intimate dining space. Various vines now take the place of tiles on the old timber framework. At night candlelight and flames dance on the variety of textures and colours of leaf and bark, which



during the day cast a dappled shade and patterns of shadow on the white floor. This seems to capture the spirit of the much sought after 'paradise' in a microcosm, that is the tiny garden of an old town house.

The simplicity of the approach to making this old neglected house into an elegant place to live is an excellent example of architectural conservation without being overly academic about it. Every one of the interventions if not conventionally correct, seems to capture the essential spirit of the building in a way that allows it to facilitate a particular lifestyle. What better conservation could there be if the old building can have an entirely new lease of life, that essentially preserves its spirit for longer?

A contrast to the urbane elegance of the old fort house is a new holiday home built by architect Geoffrey Bawa. The site on a cliff at least a hundred feet above the water is the very epitome of paradise. Magnificent views in all directions look out over a Bay to the North west, the vast expanse of the Indian ocean to the west, another bay to the south west and the tremendous

switchback of Hills to the North and Northeast stretching back to the southern platform and Adam's Peak.

Bawa's response to this overwhelming site is a minimalist 'shed' set on the foundations of a previous building that was burnt down. Instead of rising out from the ashes the building sits very lightly perched on the highest part of the site ready to take off in a high wind.

Approaching it at the end of a long steep drive up a forested hill one is confronted by a wide sweep of lawn which ends in a grove of trees. Looking closer at this grove reveals some of the trunks to be concrete columns that hold up a light single pitched aluminium roof on a steel framework. Once under the huge overhang of roof, the simple vertical and horizontal lines seems to appropriate the landscape with the imposition of a grid on to it.

The house is essentially 3 rows of 6 columns set on a flat lawn, and plain rough cement floors, holding up a slightly pitched roof sloping towards the south-west. Galvanised pipes hold up the extended five foot eaves all

round. Steel 'H' irons at door height tie the whole structure together and provide opportunity to hang wind screens or lamps or bunches of bananas as the case may be!

The two bays to the north east contains bedrooms five feet below the summit of the hill, which opens on the southwest to a lower private terrace shaded by a huge flamboyant tree. Access to this area is through a funnel like glazed stairway. The solid wood pivoting doors on two sides may be adjusted to catch the wind and force it down rather like middle eastern wind towers. The flat slab over these rooms becomes a raised platform at the end of the otherwise long open pavilion. The five feet of solid wall that enclose the rooms below visually ties back the whole structure to the ground.

Here architecture has been pared down to a minimum. There are no doors and windows to come before the view, no decoration to distract from it. The structure ties back to a primeval idea of shelter as epitomised by old 'ambalamas' and caravanserai but articulated in contemporary materials and accommodate current sensibility. It

provides a facility for a relaxed lifestyle surrounded by a paradisaical setting. Architecture reveals paradise as opposed to contriving it and affords its complete enjoyment, including a hasty retreat into the lower level enclosed rooms in high monsoon!

Here Architecture reaches a state of formlessness that makes placemaking and timelessness an inevitability and best described in the words of a poet.

HOUSE ON A RED CLIFF

There is no mirror in Mirissa

the sea is in the leaves
the waves are in the palms

old language in the arms
of the casurina pine
parampara

parampara, from
generation to generation

The flamboyant a grandfather planted
having lived through fire
lifts itself over the roof

unframed

the house an open net

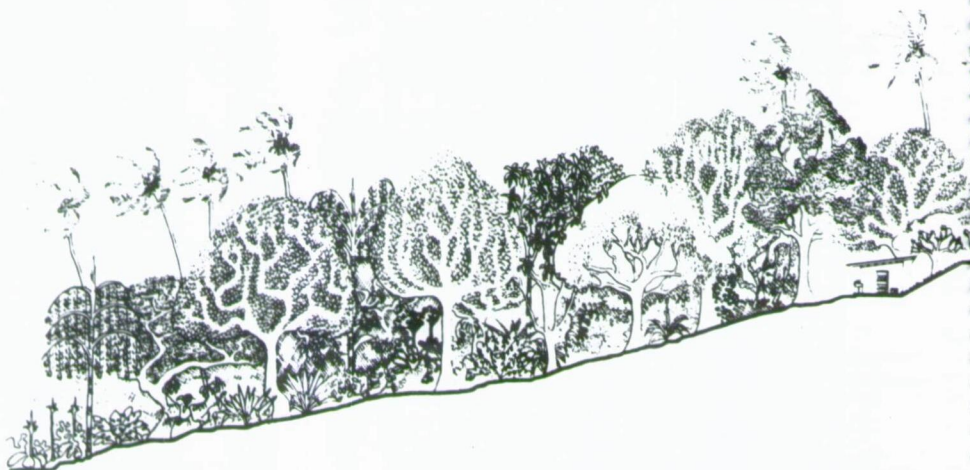
where the night concentrates
on a breath

on a step,
a thing or gesture we
cannot be attached to

just the long, the short
the difficult minutes
of night's phenomena

where even in darkness
there is no horizon without a tree

just a boat's light in the leaves
A last footsteps before formlessness



Above: Section through the site.

Below Right: Slender columns holding up the roof become part of the grove of trees.

Below: The wind scoop like entrance to the subterranean rooms.

