



“LIGHTHOUSE” – FIRED EARTH ON AQUAMARINE

By RAVIN GUNERATNE

The southern, coastline fragmented by the monsoon’s seasonal fury, has given rise to a series of rocky promontories that buttress its beaches from Ambalangoda to Tangalle. One could while the hours away and stare endlessly at the Indian Ocean crashing at one’s feet from these points of vantage whittled by the sea. Architect Geoffrey Bawa has used one of these promontories as a dais on which to locate his Lighthouse Hotel, at a point where the southern highway veers sharply towards Galle. It toasts, among other things, the Dutch interlude in our history, using it as a leitmotif to



Above: Poolside with sea – a horizontal diptych in blue hues.

Photo: Laxshman Nataraja

Left: The entrance facade of the Hotel

Photo: Channa Daswatte

generate its tastefully understated manor-house ambience.

Approached from Colombo it bursts on your field of vision edgewise, with the muted force of a pleasant interjection. North bound from Galle, it serves as a focal point that gathers the collective gaze of the passers by and reorients it towards Colombo. The variegated rubble-greys and fired earthen hues predominate on the facades, blending imperceptibly with the terrain around the site.

The ceremony of entry is of vital importance in this design. This is an

elaborate and deliberately protracted affair, an absolute necessity for the subtle heightening and progressive tightening of mood before the final architectonic denouement beside the verandah. From the glare of the forecourt, one is drawn into the comforting shade of the porch, where the expansive entry lobby provides the necessary diversion or aesthetic pause that helps one get acclimatised to the deeper and still more comforting gloom of the space that looms ahead. One moves on, held back somewhat by a sense of suspenseful anticipation and enters the cylindrical shaft of the



Above: Inner space and outer space melding around the courtyard.

Photo: Dominic Sansoni

Right: The stairwell – a juxtapositioning of sculpture, manmade and natural

Photo: Laxshman Nataraja

Below: Interior of the Coat of Arms bar.

Photo: David Robson





*Above: Room interior – punctuations that redeem the repetitive
Photo: Laxshman Nataraja*

*Below Left: Front of Room Block
Photo: Channa Daswatte*

*Below: Verandah handrail
Photo: Channa Daswatte*

*Top Right: The Verandah
Photo: Dominic Sansoni*

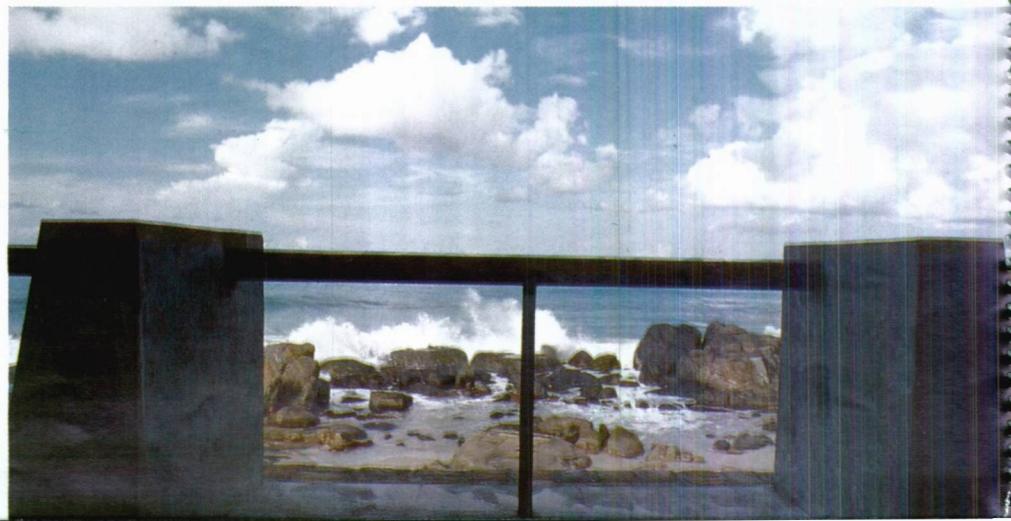
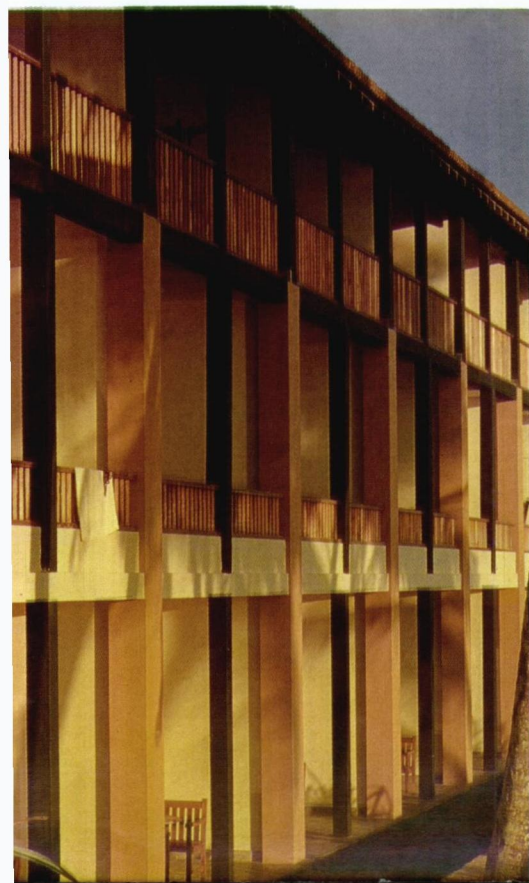
stairwell – a scooped-out platonic solid surmounted by a cupola perforated at its apex – suffused by a dim subterranean light reminiscent of a cavern.

Once within this dematerialized cylinder, the reason for having a fired earthen shade (closer to a burnt ochre in actual fact) for the hotel's facade becomes apparent: a nuggety outcrop of the site's rock with its overlay of rich orange-russet patina, has been showcased in a dark reflecting pool at the foot of the stairway. This, naturalistic sculpture embodies the sites essential tones and textures, which, in

an architectural parody of the general reflected in the particular, find their way to the outer walls of the hotel complex.

The nuances here are so rich and complex, and near mythical in intensity – sculptural rock as frozen sacrificial fire, punctured cupola paralleling the inner sky within the primitive hut and stairway spiralling upward symbolising the perennial movement of man's aspirations towards the light – that the gut wrenches in an almost primal response. The entire tableau composed with surreal aplomb, is a singularly brilliant flourish from the architect's board and the fact that it is centred round the service core of the complex (articulating the wings of the hotel and being as it were the pin on which they are pivoted), makes the experience accessible to all – virtually a rite of passage. We see the beginnings of this feature, where the visitor ascends from a dimly lit concourse below to a lobby flooded with light, in the prototypical progression from porte cochère to lobby-by-the watercourt at the Bentota Hotel, one of Bawa's earlier works.

The stairway spirals upwards to level two where the lobby is located and beyond to level three, where the Bar and Restaurant give onto a cloistered ambulatory which encloses an open-to-sky watercourt. From the sepulchral gloom of the stairwell one emerges to enter the light-filled concourse of the main lobby. This alternating complementarity of light and shadow, creates the atmosphere which is an integral feature of the hotel: the diurnal progression from light through shade once again into light, giving way to its reverse sequence during nighttime when the stairwell becomes brightly illumined to set off the dimly lit interiors. It is in this light that Laki's





phantasmagoric sculptural balustrade comes to life: reflected in the black vitrescent surface of the watercourt on level three, it loses its daytime preciousness to become a period showpiece of great ingenuity. Elsewhere, mellow lighting creates lambent pools in the semi-darkness – just the right amount necessary for intimate discourse without losing the connectivity within the spaces.

The lobby opens onto a colonnaded ambulatory skirting the main dining hall, with a verandah below that frames the ocean and sky in a horizontal diptych of varying blue hues. The agoraphobic glare of sky and ocean is muted only by the rocky beach, which thrusts itself into the sea beyond the undulating sward fronting the verandah. This provides a visual anchor that effectively breaks down the scale of the field of vision for human comprehensibility. Thus the momentum of entry, effected along a staggered axis that threads porch, stairway and lobby, subsides beside the verandah, and fans out to sea.

The floor plan is an agglomeration of five articulated segments with the rooms located in the two free-flowing

northern wings of the complex. The latter, however, are linked by a broad walkway (forming a roof terrace on level four) which separates the poolside from the rectangular courtyard abutting the lobby. Sporadic extrusions of natural rock dot these two open areas and rise dramatically through the cement render of the walkway. A rather playful ploy, but arresting nevertheless. Like the unobtrusive steps binding the boulders and leading down from the verandah, they serve to draw the terrain into the scheme and do away with the inside-outside polarity.

The rooms are absolutely stunning – and like the leaves of an exotic tree, bring to a natural climax the unfolding of the design. The rich timber cladding of the floor set off by the plain white walls, the grotto like alcove in which bathroom and dressing area are fused, rounded off by the luminous malachite-green (the colour of verdigris peeling on an antique vase) of the doors and windows – the totality of a visitor's experience crystallizes here into a heady resume !

However, as is usually the case with Bawa, the palette of textures is restrained, devoid of glitz: The greys of

rubble, cobble and cement floor finishes complimented by timber, contrast against the burnt ochre and white of walls. In fact, it is the quality of spaces and untrammelled axes rather than the veneer, which suggest pomp and ceremony. And speaking of quality, the entire range of the master's exquisite stock-in-trade is woven into the design giving life to this building. Present here are the soaring vistas across uncluttered space; secluded patios lined with the much favoured Frangipani; digressions through unexpected framed views; quiet areas for contemplation and alluring punctuations that redeem the repetitive.

The Lighthouse presents a picture of repose. There is a sense of ease in its presence which makes design seem easy. That it should not be anything other than that, is reaffirmed in the Einsteinian aspiration of "making the bad difficult and the good easy", cited by Corbusier in his Modular. This is an apt description of the Lighthouse, and indeed of most of Bawa's works.