



# *Inside-Outside*

*Words by Cosmo Brockway  
Images by Mark Luscombe-Whyte*

There is no winter in Sri Lanka, only the changing depths of light and green with the monsoon sweeping in like a baptism by the gods. Here, on the banks of Dudhwa lake with its whale-shaped island, is a hidden deme of one of the country's most enigmatic figures, the late architect Geoffrey Bawa.

Born to a Burgher family, an empiric mingling of Sinhalese, Scottish, French and German blood ran through Bawa's veins. Following in ancestral footsteps, he studied law at Cambridge and, later, architecture in London. The story goes that having bought an old rubber plantation, Lunuganga (meaning 'salt river'), on a whim, in lieu of the estate in Italy he was musing over, a French cousin came to visit. She suggested he might actually earn a living from his obvious genius for creating spaces. "I have plenty of money," was his retort over tea, to which his relation, Georgette Camille, formidable friend of Picasso and Braque, harrumphed, "I have much more money than you, and I can tell you it runs out."

"Geoffrey was a master at inventing a story out of nothing. Nowhere is this clearer than at Lunuganga," explains Channa Daswatte, Chairperson of the Geoffrey Bawa Trust. "He brought modernism to Sri Lanka, but he deftly translated it for the island. He accepted, rather than rejecting our history and environment and interwove them into a fresh story. By the time he became such an influential architect in the '60s, he had stamped his own aesthetic as inherently Sri Lankan. This has inspired the next generation of architects, including me, and will continue to do so." Protégés like Daswatte have carried forward Bawa's aesthetic ethos—recycling and salvaging as an elevated art form. It is a legacy Bawa shares with contemporaries such as the late Luis Barragán, who also seamed the local vernacular into his creations, reinvigorating them for the modern age and using the dance of shadow and scale as a siren—allowing the eye and the spirit to soar.

Lunuganga evolved over four decades. Bawa saw the contours of the land, and, like a sculptor seeing a form

inside a block of marble, he chiseled away to bring forth his own Eden—often directing work through a megaphone from his afternoon tea setting. His first act, a flourish of apparent madness relished by the locals who savor eccentricity, was to clear away the perfectly good rubber trees for a view across the lake to the distant hilltop temple of Katukulia, a medieval stupa. The original plans for the landscape are marked by a forensic level of detail, every leaf of each tree is drawn, nothing is skimmed or scrawled. Here, like the bower of a flowering vine, nature is allowed to ensorcell and encircle. The loggias, with their 17th-century wooden columns, are nestled between trees. Classical statues, brought from Italy, are speckled with lichen and moss, while giant palm fronds, with shadows like primitive birds, cast sunlight across windows.

Crowning a slope of land with the name Cinnamon Hill, Bawa placed a Ming urn under an old Moonamal tree, using this relic of the Portuguese spice trade as an eye-catcher. The scene spills onto the rice paddies and undulating hills beyond. On the south lawn is a brick gazebo, where the man himself might sit on a full moon night and "catch a glimpse of centaurs in pineapple fields." To wander through the garden 'rooms' strewn with pavilions, perspectives, and a tumbling sense of 'inside-outside' living is to encounter elements of English Romantic, Oriental contemplation, and Renaissance antiquity.

In an obituary, Bawa is described as the man who "broke down the barriers between inside and outside, between building and landscape...between east and west." His chosen house eschews the belligerent pomp of colonial memory in favor of something so innately modest yet so sparingly grand, it is hard to see where Bawa's imagination ends and Lunuganga begins. His gift for patina, conjured as if by magic, is illustrated in the story of some Japanese visitors charmed into reverent silence while standing in the ochre-yellow Sandela Pavilion. "Very beautiful, Mr. Bawa. So ancient. How old?" "Oh, about six weeks," came the airy reply. Here time stands the most still; here, the moon is held between the sculptural Frangipani trees; here, a flicker of immortality seems to burn from the red Sri Lankan earth—Bawa lives on.

























