

Emulating Vernacular: Role of tradition in the elite domestic architecture of Geoffrey Bawa and Valentine Gunasekara

Nishan Rasanga Wijetunge

School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment,
Nottingham Trent University, U.K.

Abstract

This paper critically examines the post-independence architecture of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), in which reverting back to tradition took centre stage. It discusses the pioneering works of two architects from this particular time frame that led the way to subsequent emulation of tradition in the architectural developments in the island, especially after 1977s neo-liberal economic reforms. The paper divulges the underlying factors behind the making of the very disparate approaches of these two architects, while assessing their successes and failures. It especially evaluates the role of tradition in their architectural approaches.

Keywords: Tradition, post-independence, Sri Lanka, Geoffery Bawa, Valentine Gunasekara,

Introduction

In the contemporary global architectural milieu, homogenizing forces of the mass-media and built mediocrities of the international fashions have relegated traditional continuity (Lim and Beng, 1998). In such a context, questioning the respective roles of tradition in contemporary global architecture becomes imperative in determining its future prospects. If the foregoing reproach is directed at Ceylon (presently Sri Lanka), addressing its immediate post-independence period becomes indispensable, where reverting back to tradition became evident in an array of fields including architecture.

It is posited that the two most celebrated post-independence domestic architectural rubrics in Ceylon are *Neo-Regionalism (NR)* and *Expressionist Modernism (EM)* of which the two most renowned proponents were Geoffrey Bawa and valentine Gunasekara. It was the pioneering works of these two architects during the post independence period that in fact led the way to subsequent architectural developments in the island, especially after 1977s neo-liberal economic reforms. Their approaches however were distinctly different, although both aimed at enumerating tradition in a modernist idiom. This paper, on examining this phenomenon will stress upon the social facet of elitism, and the vitality of political influence on their occurrence, out of an ensemble of factors, by briefly touching on extant elitist theories.

Tradition in Architecture

The word “*tradition*” originates from the Latin verb “*trado-transdo*”, which means “*to pass on to another*”, or “*to transmit possession*”. Tradition is thus seen as a dual process of preservation as well as transmission (Beng, 1994: 21). According to T.S Eliot, a true sense of tradition is a sense of the timeless and the temporal together. As Beng says,

“Tradition...cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour. It involves in the first place, a historical sense, which...involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence...”

(Beng, 1994: 21).

Although the definition of tradition is commonly perceived to be a set of fixed attributes, many repudiate this view and believe it to be a series of layers transformed over time (Lim and Beng, 1998). Hobsbawm postulates the notion of “*invented tradition*”, which includes both traditions that are gradually invented, constructed and formally instituted as well as the ones to emerge in a less easily-defined manner within a short time-frame. He defines tradition as,

“...taken to mean a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past”

(Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 1)

Throughout history, discontinuities in architectural traditions have been prolific.¹ In traditional societies, cultural processes and external forces take a long time to be considered as “*established*”. Once this is completed, they sustain for extended periods of time (Lim and Beng, 1998). Williams however, disseminates that, what may pass-off as “*cultural traditions*” or the “*significant past*” is actually selective traditions (1980: 39).² Hence, it could be perceived that traditions are always contested, transformed, resisted and invented over time. It could be affirmed with a great number of examples from around the world that, in traditional societies, age-old architectural forms have reached high sophistication. Albeit their slow denigration, they remain more expressive and sympathetic to the aspirations of the people than any contemporary contender. The expressions of these surviving traditions attain vigor and conviction through their local craftsmen practices, which truly celebrate their devotion, contemplation and commemoration (Lim and Beng, 1998). On the other hand, in the field of architecture, a dichotomy exists in the form of ‘*grand design tradition*’

¹ Architecture has not remained “*pure*” anywhere, as there have always been hybrids (cross-fertilizations) of indigenous and imported. The two have been diffused, hybridized, and in the process, synergized. Hence, such types in their respective forms, in a given time frame, are potential models for even more similar transformations.

² “*From a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded.....Some of these meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture*” (Williams, 1980: 39).

and, its antithesis, the *'folk tradition'*. Rapoport postulates that the monument-buildings belong to the grand design tradition, and are erected to impress either the populace in terms of the power of the patron, or peer-group of designers and cognoscenti with the cleverness of designer and good taste of patron. The folk tradition in contrast, is said to be the direct unselfconscious translation into physical form of a culture; its needs and values, as well as desires, dreams and passions. *"The folk tradition is much more closely related to the culture of the majority and life as it is really lived than the grand design tradition, which represents the culture of the elites"* (Rapoport, 1969: 2).³

Identity via Architectural Tradition

Culture is generally conceived as *"the way of life"*. It can be best-defined through its specific characteristics; namely, *"the accepted way of doing things, the socially unacceptable ways and the implicit ideals"* (Rapoport, 1969: 47). It plays a seminal role in the construction of society; which could either be culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous. Both these situations could possibly find an enhanced degree of sophistication owing to the existence of sub-cultures within a given culture.⁴ Culture entails various traditions relating to the assorted functions of human life. In other words, culture ensures that its citizens abide by different sets of rules set by tradition, in relation to the performance of these functions respectively. Such rules ensure that whatever underlying factors⁵ behind them are preserved for posterity, while manifesting a unique identity in relation to a given function. The notion of identity has always been intricately-related to traditions; as lingering on to traditions is what gives a society its identity. Douglas and d'Harnoncourt postulate that, *"To rob a people of its tradition is to rob it of inborn strength and identity"* (in Lim and Beng, 1998: 54).

Since making buildings is a basic necessity of the human repertoire, different cultures from around the world have primordially developed their very own built traditions. Since every society essentially entails a "high" culture that influences "other levels" of cultures, as suggested by Bottomore (1993: 116),⁶ in terms of building traditions, this distinction could be further elaborated – high culture chooses "grand design traditions" whilst other cultural levels are relegated to "folk design traditions". Vernacular is a variant of folk tradition with a unique identity of its own. *"Implicit in the term 'vernacular' is the notion of building as an organic process, involving society as a whole"* (Lim and Beng, 1998: 10). Perceived as *"architecture without architects"* as suggested by Beng (1994: 19); edifices of vernacular are not merely perceived to be the brainchild of any individual architect, but the

³ The authentic meaning behind *folk tradition* could be discerned as, *"...the world view writs small, the "ideal" environment of a people expressed in buildings and settlements, with no designer, artist, or architect with an axe to grind (although to what extent the designer is really a form giver is a moot point)."*

Folk design tradition represents itself in the form of vernacular; which again could be classified as primitive and other forms, where the latter could again be divided into pre-industrial and industrial (Rapoport, 1969: 2).

⁴ This is possible owing to factors such as religion, occupation and cast-system etc.

⁵ These underlying factors could be religious, symbolic, biological and environmental etc.

⁶ In every society which is complex, there is a number of *'levels of culture'* to be found, and it is utmost vital for the health of the society that these levels of culture inter-relate to each other. Yet, the manner and the taste of society as a whole should be influenced by the society's *'highest culture'* (Bottomore, 1993: 116).

product of an entire community as a whole; working through its history (Lim and Beng, 1998). Vernacular structures are invariably built by local craftsmen of anonymity with local techniques and materials, reflecting society's accumulated wisdom and collective images. They are imbued with cosmological and religious values, social and political structures, and sensibility and attitude towards time and space. Moreover, their forms and proportions, craftsmanship and decorations manifest symbolic propensities and hence, are meaningful (Beng, 1994). As Lim and Beng suggest, "*There is hardly any need or scope for "improvement" in the various vernacular languages of housing generated indigenously around the world...*" (1998: 11).

Sri Lankan Architectural Identity

The foregoing enquiry leads the way into establishing how the Sri Lankan domestic architectural identity was formed over the centuries. According to Nalin de Silva (2006), a unified Sinhalese culture saw its inception in the 4th century B.C., and saw revitalization as the 'Sinhalese Buddhist' culture with the advent of Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C. Since then, as the 'dominant' culture in the island – in agreement with the term legitimized by Eriksen (2002:121), it has produced an array of distinctive traditions. With regard to architectural traditions, when grand design tradition⁷ has always been delimited by decree to royals and the religious order in palaces and temples respectively, its folk counterpart (i.e. the vernacular) formed the domestic domain of its masses. However, the system franchised elites (and sub-elites to a lesser extent) to incorporate certain grand design traits into their primarily vernacular-based domestic buildings (Wijetunge, 2011). This arrangement thus formed the unique Sinhalese domestic architectural identity with regional variations. As T.K.N.P de Silva suggests, the traditional Sinhalese house that has existed for more than two thousand years,

"... was an outcome of a strong philosophy of Buddhistic life - i.e. the simplicity and the impermanent nature of life. The house was part and parcel of nature, the materials were borrowed from the nature and returned to the nature...The traditional concept was to live in and around the open areas of the house and not within the enclosed compartments ... and it was the most suitable solution for Sri Lankan climatic conditions"

(Silva,1990:16)

Similarly, the less-dominant minority cultures belonging to elite and sub-elite categories—mainly Tamils—also developed in their respective areas of inhabitation, unique architectural traditions of their own (see Lewcock, Sansoni and Senanayake, 2002). It was from this rich palette of traditions that the new generation of post-independence period Ceylonese architects subsequently borrowed.

Manifestation capabilities of the elite domestic form

The elites in society are an *organized-minority*, which tend to dominate the '*unorganized masses*' in terms of an array of practices (Mosca, 1939: 53). These could be

⁷ It has to be stressed here that grand design tradition extant in the medieval period was arguably, the residue of what is considered as the 'classical period' – the culmination point of Sinhalese architecture.

attributed to their superior intellectual and physical qualities possessed by Nature, to inherited or acquired powers, essentially in economic and political spheres (Bottomore, 1993). Through these superior qualities, elites tend to stay at society's forefront manifesting their prestige, leading way for masses to follow, while striving to further-widen the existing gulf between the two stratum. This generic nature of elites as a whole is true, irrespective of their location in the world, whether in a primitive society or the most advanced. In the olden ages, apex-status of elites was manifested through their *royal, noble, cleric, aristocratic* or *bourgeois* positions in society, and in the contemporary world, they prevail in the forms of *intellectuals, managers of industry or bureaucrats*, making these elite-positions real determiners of most life aspects of masses (Bottomore, 1993: 404). The elites rule, manage, and are the ideological think tanks that manipulate society, while masses merely go along with what is imposed upon them with minimal resistance. Hence, the elites facilitate new political and economic changes in society, or alternatively, these changes take place because of them and their self-centered actions.⁸ On the other hand, Pareto's *economic dimension* (in Bottomore, 1993: 2) postulates that, economics is a vital aspect that constitutes elitism. The elites epitomize their political power to achieve the economic edge over masses or alternatively, the reverse takes effect, as Mandel (1982: 18-25) points out as it happened through human history. Policies of the so-called "*governing or political elites*"⁹ as Pareto (1960: 1423-1424) refers to them, always strive to reinforce the best interests of its allied-elites of "*close coalition*", as Bottomore (1993: 277) suggests. This is achieved through a concretization of an inequitable system that in turn makes and sustains them, with the intention of assuring its posterity. With the dawn of 20th century, it could be perceived that merely the elites possessing some combined degree of economic as well as political edge, and occasionally the intellectual edge, became particularly capable of social influence. These abilities consigned them at the elite-apex as the "political" or "governing" elite, along with their immediate circle. The bureaucrats, managers and intellectual elites who merely possessed what their given names suggest, were relegated to immediate lower elite stratum. However, coalition between the apex and this stratum is what keeps the system intact. The sub-elite stratum (i.e. the middle-class) forming the liaison between the ensemble of elites and masses could be conceived as a different and less-influential group altogether (Bottomore, 1993). This Western-derived structure of elitism was subsequently imparted on the Ceylonese context via five epochs of Western colonialism.¹⁰

⁸ It has to be noted here that political changes may also occur due to social revolutions. In that case it referred to as 'circulation of elites', where a faction of elites within the political class itself, replace the apex.

⁹ From the ensemble of various types of elites in a given society, the governing elites tend to possess the greatest level of power, which places them at the centre of high cultural influence. Governing elites could either be an absolute monarchy, a certain form of collective government (democracy, socialism etc.) or any combination of varying degree of the two. The extent of high cultural access made available to the other elites, by the governing elites, varies in different contexts. In most Western contexts after Modernity for example, high culture has not been a jealously-guarded condition. Conversely, in the East, it has always been delimited either to the royal family alone, or to the immediate circle of aristocrats surrounding them.

¹⁰ The quasi elite structure that sprung up by deliberate-intermingling of Eastern and Western counterparts during Portuguese and Dutch rules was jettisoned in the late 19th century. This was achieved via a Ceylonese appropriation of a fully-fledged British elite structure analogous to the one above. Roberts (2005: 147-148) affirms this point through his discourse of the late 19th and early 20th century British Ceylon's newly-acquired

Since political and economic arenas are the *raison d'être* behind elitism, they also make elites the most sensitive their periodic changes in comparison to the masses. Domestic building on the other hand, is a basic human necessity, which articulates the lifestyle of its dwellers. Then again, life style is a reflection of various traditions imbued in a given culture. As Rapoport elaborates,

“The house is an institution, not just a structure, created for a complex set of purposes. Because building a house is a cultural phenomenon, its form and organization are greatly influenced by the cultural milieu to which it belongs...”
(Rapoport, 1969: 46)

Hence, changes in culture are expressed in behavior, and articulated in the physical form of buildings (Rapoport, 1969). Accordingly, since elites are the most sensitive to the society's politico-economic spheres, it could be suggested that, a given society's politico-economic changes are best-manifested in the built traditions of its governing elite—as the most politically powerful faction—with a unique identity. Rybczynski's (1988) discourse of the elite contiguity to 'home' further strengthens this argument.¹¹ However, the pertinent point to stress here is the impact this particular group can yield over the greater architectural realm of their society—both at domestic and civic levels—through their political influence.

Tradition and Identity in Ceylonese Architecture by Independence

After the Dutch-held maritime regions were handed-over to *British East India Company* in 1796, which was followed by the fall of Kandyan kingdom in 1815, the British instigated the colonial project in Ceylon (see Mills, 1964). Since the early 16th century to this point in time, Ceylon had remained one of the conspicuous penetration outposts in the Portuguese-Dutch created Seaborne Empire. The radical capitalist economic policies and gradual democratic reforms imposed by British colonists spawned a new peripheral status for Ceylon within the British Empire; with its hinterland centered upon London (Perera, 1994). Consequently, Ceylon that had managed to sustain a modest level of globalization to this point in time suddenly started to feel its effects more rigorously.

It is recognised that the European Colonial projects affected new paradigm shifts throughout the whole of Asia, and the unequal socio-cultural as well as economic exchanges resulted in the emergence of “*re-invented*” traditions in hitherto unforeseen scales, according to Hobsbawn and Ranger (in Lim and Beng, 1998: 55). Within this process, certain hybrid architectures that relegated local identities emerged, and eventually gained acceptance with time (Lim and Beng, 1998). Hence, such colonial architectural trends could be conceived as forces of homogenization.

western-type liberal occupations (such as lawyers and civil servants etc.), which began to be addressed as “*genteel professions*”. This ideology in fact, survived though the postcolonial period to the present day in Sri Lanka.

¹¹ The fact that the elites are the pioneers to have historically developed a degree of intimacy with their dwellings than any other social stratum, further-contributes to the concretization of this view.

This indeed is confirmatory for the elite domestic realm in colonial Ceylon. Following the British conquest and unification, European architectural traditions that had been in existence for centuries in the maritime (since the Portuguese occupation) crept into the Kandyan regions. Consequently, by the early decades of the 19th century, the Sinhalese elite manor house (*Wallauwe*) was largely altered, whereas the sub-elite dwelling (*Hathara-andi-gedara*) suffered relatively a lesser metamorphosis (Wijetunge, 2011). Meanwhile, albeit the feeble launching that mainly dwelled on the traditions of the expelled Dutch predecessors, the British building program commenced and subsequently proliferated throughout the island. By the time Ceylon was granted its political independence in 1948, the island had experienced three distinctly identifiable *phases of British architecture* (Lewcock, Sansony and Senanayake, 2002: 249-301). Phase-3 of British architecture is perceived to be the one where British finally made their mark by curtailing the prior hybrid Dutch influence to a meager level (Wijetunge, 2007). In the domestic architectural scene, this was largely realized through the burgeoning influence of the 19th century *colonial bungalow* they had painstakingly developed in the subcontinent (see King, 1984). Phase-3 saw its finale by attempting to rationalize an ideally-functional and comfortable colonial domestic building for the tropics in the form of Public Works Department's bungalow-influenced *Tropical Colonial style* (PWD-style) (Pieris, 2007: 49-50). This almost paralleled with Modernist propagations of the *Tropical School of AA*, which strived to derive a streamlined *Tropical Modernism* (TM) for the world's dry and humid zones (Fry and Drew, 1982); a further evolution of *CIAM 8's* Modernist *avant-garde*. It has to be stressed here that mainly the colonial elite—arguably the colonial bourgeoisie and also sub-elite; the petty-bourgeoisie to a lesser extent—welcomed the aforesaid architectural trends, whereas the majority of peasants who were still largely rural, did not alter their vernacular (Jayewardene, 1984).

On the other hand, Ceylonese equivalents of the Phase-3 discourse emerged in the forms of *Indic styles*, and *pseudo architecture*, which were largely delimited to monumental and civic buildings as Pieris (2007) and Robson (2004) both affirm. By this juncture, the peripheral position of the newly-independent nations had been concretized through neo-colonial practices of the central Western-core (Perera, 1994). These attempted ideological impartations of architecture could be conceived as a desperate measure to form a patronizing relationship between the core and periphery. These tendencies prevailed in Ceylon after independence, under the auspices of a so-called "*post-colonial third culture*". They, who had assumed political power from the British, resembled their foreign predecessors in every conceivable manner (Perera, 1994).

A new necessity of Identity

A political breakthrough came in 1956 when a faction of the local elite—having broken away from the mainstream pro-colonial inclination—came into political power in Ceylon having been equipped with a strong nationalist agenda. As a reactionary force against the bitter memories of colonialism, they adopted the best extant alternative; the left-wing socialist slogans (Perera, 1994). Moreover, the newly-liberated disparate ethnicities in the island, who had been previously suppressed by the colonial heel, had to be unified under a single national identity; circumventing the propensity for future tension

(Perera, 1994). This, in Jayewardene's (1984) view, was undertaken originally by the fields of arts, drama, music, literature and cinema etc. with their renowned respective proponents—debatably, all conceivable as means of nationalist resurgence that pre-dated independence—that subsequently trickled-down into architecture. Thus, within such a backdrop, analogous to the quest of their contemporaries in other newly-liberated colonies that Perera (1994) attests to, several nascent Ceylonese architects embarked on the journey to formulate a new architectural identity for the nation.¹² He particularly stresses on the encouragement given by the indigenous political leaders (i.e. governing elite) of such states in this quest. Peiris draws a valid analogy with *Calud Levi-Strauss's* appropriation of the terms *bricoleur* and *engineer*, and in her view, the two mainstream approaches of the Ceylonese architects from the period in question (Pieris, 2007: 150-152).

Neo-Regionalism: The *modus operandi* of a Bricoleur

Ceylon's post-colonial architects were essentially educated in the Western-core.¹³ It was a context where, the core institutions had monopolized peripheral architectural education (Perera, 1994). It is also evident that clients of these architects were essentially, the country's elites or sub-elites of some form. From the ensemble of Ceylonese architects at the outset of independence, the so-called 'first generation'— Minnette de Silva (MDS), Geoffrey Bawa (GB) and Valentine Gunasekara (VG) stand out from the rest, owing to their attempted deviation from the mainstream of TM, and its variants that overlapped with the fringes of European and American factions of the International Style (IS). These could be conceived as rubrics of largely a homogenizing inclination. As proponents of this particular rubric, architects such as Andrew Boyd, Oliver Weerasinghe, Hubert Gonsal, Billimoria, Shirley d'Alwis, Visva Selvarathnam, Leon Monk etc. thus went largely unnoticed¹⁴ – only acknowledged for their prominent projects – whereas the ground-breakers came to occupy conspicuous positions in the island's architectural history. This point is attested via wide acknowledgements they received, from autobiographies, magazine articles, and academic-journal papers to university dissertations; that have all scrutinized their respective approaches.

MDS, a former AA (Architectural Association School of London) trainee, was the pioneer to adopt a synthesis between vernacular and modernism with due emphasis on sociological experiences of Ceylon's rural life and arts and crafts (Jayewardene, 1983). Depicting her stance, she coined the term "*modern regional architecture in the tropics*", as

¹² Anoma Peiris postulates that, the task facing Ceylon's postcolonial architects was twofold. On one hand, the need for constructing a sense of geographic belonging against a former history of colonial expression, European Modernism (inculcated to them through their core-based architectural education), and nascent chauvinist nationalism of the region as a whole, was prevalent. On the other, they needed to reconcile their only training – the one in modernism – to the design of tropical environments (Pieris, 2007: 150-152).

¹³ This was owing to the fact that Ceylon did not have any architectural schools of its own at the time.

¹⁴ Although non-architect architecture (by technicians and architectural draughtsman) was evident from the British period, it became a common phenomenon by the 1960s. For the middle class who had newly approached urban centers for employment prospects, rubrics such as the so-called 'American style' appealed greatly. These were largely designed by non-architects. After the 1970s (especially after 1977), some of them became renowned. Jayewardene particularly illustrates Alfred Kalubovila (see Jayewardene, 1984).

early as the 1950s (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 2001: 31). Her work overtly manifested the problems of post-coloniality, which was exposed as a *“precarious balance of Eastern and Western cultures than merely an aesthetic resolution”* (Pieris, 2007: 50). GB who qualified a few years junior to MDS, also from the AA, appropriated somewhat a similar approach. They both started-off with Tropical Modernist ideology coupled with the referenced vernacular building practices by their immediate colonial practitioner predecessors (Scriver and Prakash, 2007). The incorporation of timeless and unconscious hence, backed this approach with authenticity. Clifford (1987: 121-130) describes this as a *“savage paradigm”*; a colonial discussion of a climatically-appropriate native architecture with the desire to rescue authenticity out of destructive historical changes. This approach according to Lico (in Pieris, 2007: 10) was not delimited to Ceylon, and also implemented in other countries of Asia. Subsequently, while MDS did not win many projects, GB’s success went from strength to strength (Robson, 2002).¹⁵

GB drew inspiration from a range of regional architectures from Europe, Ceylon’s own colonial past as well as its pre-colonial examples of both grand and folk design traditions from different ethnic situations. Especially in his domestic projects for influential governing elites, vernacular recurred overtly. Arguably, the kind of vernacular that became pervasive in his works came largely from the manor houses¹⁶ of Kandyan elite apex as well as its sub-elites. This spawned an incongruous degree of familiarization in his architecture, which was lacking in the projects of his contemporaries. However, many perceive that Bawa’s architecture *“...has a western aesthetic sensibility and provided a utopian comfort zone for a clientele facing the many disruptions of post-colonial change, of urban growth, and industrialization”* (Pieris, 2007: 9). As Rykwert tells us, *“Memory is to a person what history is to a group. As memory conditions perception and is in turn modified by it, so the history of design and of architecture contains everything that has been designed or built and is continually modified by new work....”* (1982: 31). Hence, *“...There is no humanity without memory and there is no architecture without historic reference”*. Analogously, Eliot (in Beng, 1994: 10) disseminates that, *“The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past....the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show”*. Lim and Beng (1998: 10) further-concretize the above notion by affirming that, *“If one does not hear the past clearly and honestly, it cannot become part of one’s work. Architecture, like the other visual arts, is in the final analysis the domain of the intuitive mind and eye”* (Lim and Beng, 1998: 10). Alternatively, it is possible indeed, to seek synthesis of traditional and contemporary (appearing as binary oppositions) through Art.¹⁷ However, such a synthesis should not be of *janus-faced* nature with the

¹⁵ Robson hints that one of the foremost reasons for Ulrik Plesner’s departure from MDS’s practice to join GB’s was the lack of success of the former and the relative success of the later.

¹⁶ These domestic buildings drew mainly on the indigenous vernacular belonging to folk design tradition, as well as for certain traits of grand design tradition.

¹⁷ The Renaissance’s architects and artists such as *Michael Angelo, Borromini* and the others, successfully-mediated strong beliefs and practices of the Roman church with the mythic imagery of ancient Greece and Rome.

schizophrenic coexistence of two opposing ideas, but one single gesture which should simultaneously be contemporary and timeless as well as “ethnic” and “modern” (Lim and Beng, 1998: 10).

Hence, elucidation of these disseminations affirm that, this is what exactly Bawa’s architecture was about. Working with the scarce resources available to him, and with no striking innovation, he had undoubtedly played the role of a bricoleur; indeed of a very clever one.¹⁸ The lure of picturesque along with nostalgic propensity and romanticism of the period had undermined the full potential of technological innovations in architecture. The ideal stepping stone for NR was astutely conceived by Bawa as the elite domestic realm of postcolonial Ceylon. The architect himself hailing from an elite background may have caused such an intuition. By recreating environments imbued with elite associations of both indigenous and hybrid-colonial conditions of familiarity, tradition had concretized the immutability of its elite stratum of patronage. Hence, as Pieris (2007) suggests, a potential restructuring of the country’s postcolonial social sphere was made feeble by this rubric, and consequently the socio-economic mobility of the masses was largely hindered. The hybrid local identity it catered for, again, was favored by the country’s Westernized and semi-westernized elites with their mostly urban and hedonistic life-styles. They were in fact, products of colonial ‘hybridity’ as Bhabha (1994) postulates. Other than its limitation to an elite clientele, the style was further-limited by the rigidity of the colonial structure as well the perpetuating ethno-religious nationalism. The new urban middle-class meanwhile were either caught up in this nationalist zeal or lost in capitalist and homogenizing practices of the international style (see Jayewardene, 1983), whereas the rural masses did not alter the way they had always built for centuries – at least till the 1980s modernization programs by the state (see Robson, 1984).

Neo-Regionalism’s public acceptance eventually came with the auspice of the state-implemented civic projects, and with the ideological transformations they facilitated.¹⁹ State commissions were in fact, the result of the acceptance by the governing elite, the rubric GB originally implemented in their houses. At the national level, the rubric suffered a paradigm shift from Bawa’s own facile objectives as Pieris (2007: 11) suggests, into a whole different plane; with its *“revivalist, traditionalist and chauvinistic forms”*, eventually making it conceivable to the masses. The reception by masses here is arguably an illegitimate one as NR was chosen on behalf of them by their governing elite. Moreover, it was regionalism–rigorously backed by the political sphere–which heightened its focus on identity, and not the neo-vernacular in its original form devised by the pioneers. Regionalism was then oriented towards an international audience for eventual laudability as the evidence presented by

¹⁸ Consequently, this rubric culminated to become the flagship elite domestic-style of the island by the 1970s and 80s. Moreover, it became the ideal manifestation of the immutable position of country’s core-oriented elites in the top ranks. It also assured through architecture, the posterity of the elite-made system.

¹⁹ In Jayewardene’s (1983: 253) view, GB’s work was limited to mainly domestic and civic realms, and to a lesser extent small-scale industrial. As she confirms, he was not responsible for any significant commercial projects. It is also notable how his industrial projects employed TM (see Robson, 2002). Thus, arguably, NR found success especially in the domestic and civic realms.

Robson (2002) suggests.²⁰ In Pieris's view, it thus failed miserably in the attempt to achieve a much-needed decolonization architecturally.

Expressionist Modernism: The *modus operandi* of an Engineer-Bricoleur

“ To rob a people of opportunity to grow through invention or through acquisition of values from other races is to rob it from its future”

(Lim and Beng, 1998: 54).

This Modernity-instigated Western line of thinking could indeed be perceived as the motto behind the architecture of Valentine Gunasekara (VG). He took inspiration from America, epitomizing exposure of his study tours,²¹ and sojourns in California. Henceforth, he deviated from tropical modernist school quite early in his career after assimilating its essence. Freedom of spaces, tectonic qualities, and technological emphasis—i.e. new material experiments and rigorous modular articulation of form of structures—were borrowed from extant American experiments (Gunasekara, 2011). VG chose to relegate the industrial aesthetic of European *avant-garde* to the appropriation of landscape-centered American counterpart. In the affluent works of Eero Saarinen, Louis Kahn, Charles and Ray Eames, he saw an effort to mould new technologies into an aesthetic that resonated with a specific geography; that he conceived to be a definitive break with the colonial past. As Pieris suggests,

“The plastic curvature of concrete, experimented with in tropical climates by South American modernists, suggested an approach that could parallel the linearity of the prairie style that had emphasized the expanse of the American geography.....”

(Pieris,2007: 13)

Seminally, *“...The reference to ancient monuments of Incas and Mayas in Californian Modernists suggested ways in which he [VG] might approach and reinterpret Sri Lanka's historic architecture”*. For VG *“...undulating softness of the tropical geography and interweaving of form and space in the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa would be parallel sources of inspiration”*.

VG conceived the emerging urban middle-class (i.e. new class of local professionals, graduates from newly-formed Sri Lankan universities etc. of mostly rural origin, who decided to migrate to urban centers to grasp employment opportunities)—the new sub-elite of Sri Lanka—to carry the vitality for self-definition, essential for potential economic growth and

²⁰ Robson, in GB's 2002 autobiography points out to the ways how his architecture was popularised both in Sri Lanka and abroad. Firstly, his state commissions (the ones aimed at the masses) won him some popularity either in positive or negative terms. These state commissions would have accompanied government propaganda that would have been instrumental for making his name popular. Secondly, the magazine and journal articles (especially, the Aga Khan Award series etc.) by his friends and acquaintances at the academic level made a reputation for him at the international level. Thirdly, the same faction with the help of some of his governing elite clients was responsible for arranging exhibitions of his work in the West. Fourthly, his services as a part-time tutor both in universities in Sri Lanka and abroad, won him new followers.

²¹ Gunasekara received the Rockefeller Foundation Travel Grant in 1965 and travelled the US. (Pieris, 2007: 152)

thus, upward social mobility. Although, it is middle-class cultural expansion that paved the way for general cultural expansion in Sri Lanka, it never got off to a position where this particular faction could threaten the immutable position of the country's elites.²² In a rapidly globalizing world, Gunasekara recognized the changing Sri Lankan lifestyles in the process of assimilating western values. However, he managed to maintain aspects that facilitated family gatherings and hospitable spirits, in order to make home-life desirable. VG stressed on the importance of culture to the development of the human spirit, and exposed its essential factors of faith, family, community and personal identity (Pieris, 2007).

However, VG's ideology was arguably dogged by the hybrid Sinhalese-Catholic culture that he wholeheartedly admired. He perhaps perceived this particular culture to be more liberal than the majority's Sinhalese-Buddhist counterpart, and also found it to be on par with Socialist communality. The apparent contiguity between Catholicism and Socialist ideals is in fact, confirmed by de Silva (2008). Despite the fact that his earlier house designs greatly resembled tropical modernism, VG's approach endured a metamorphosis that evolved through modernist expressionism to the final form of deconstruction towards the twilight of his career (Gunasekara, 2011).²³ A pervasive factor in retrospect to his works was the sectarian devotion to technological experimentation. Sri Lanka's engineering profession of the 1970s—according to Sri Lanka Institution of Engineers' *Innovation and Self-reliance; Kulasinghe Felicitation Volume, History of Engineering in Sri Lanka, 2001 Volume*—underwent an innovative phase, and Gunasekara became one of its beneficiaries (Pieris, 2007: 13).²⁴ Behind the technological emphasis, there was an agenda of making modernity plausible to the masses via affordable architecture (Gunasekara, 2011). In relation to his projects, Gunasekara not only played the part of bricoleur—picking up various seminal architectural influences from an array of mainstream world-wide practices of the time—he knew exactly what engineering tools to epitomize for each job, to a level of efficacy; making his approach one belonging to an engineer-bricoleur's. Albeit its groundbreaking approaches, the rubric overtly rejected tradition, perceiving it as a 'backward step' to progression as it is connoted by Lim and Beng (1998: 13). However, architectural modernism that he based his broader aims on, had a share of flaws of its own, especially with regard to the newly-independent tropics.²⁵ The foregoing tendencies apparent in VG's works could indeed be bracketed down to his repudiation of the elitist class; their feudalistic, capitalist and hedonistic inclinations. A more just and equal society was the ideal for humanity in his mind (Gunasekara, 2011).

²² Despite the potential to become such a counterforce, with time, they merely became the stratum that formed the liaison between the elites and masses; exactly the function of "sub-elites" throughout world history.

²³ This could be affirmed via a chronological evaluation of personalized houses completed throughout his career.

²⁴ Pre-cast concrete, thin shell structures and industrial methods had attained a point of culmination, and such techniques were appropriated into his repertoire. The close partnership with engineer Jayati Weerakoon made such innovations plausible. (Pieris, 2007: 152).

²⁵ Although its bold formal expression undermined the colonial metropolitan identities that had previously been hegemonic in Asian cities, it never quite won the hearts and minds of the peoples of the region. This stance could in-deed, be blamed on a fallacy, which inculcated the notion of modernism as an "identity-free" rubric.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a nation with a primordial Sinhalese-Buddhist culture of dominance, and its accompanying corpus of rich traditions. Sinhalese built traditions (both grand and folk design variants) that had survived up to independence had been time-tested throughout the apparent quantum leaps in world globalization history that pertained to the island. By analyzing the relative success of GB who acknowledged such traditions in his architecture as against VG who excluded and in turn, became less-successful, the immutability of country's dominant culture and traditions articulates itself. Thus, it could be argued that beneath a veneer of appropriated Western cultural attributes (i.e. western modernity) of the hybrid Lankan elites, the fervor for indigenous traditions persists.

Furthermore, the different degrees of political auspices received by GB and VG—the former receiving largely governing elite commissions and the latter, middle-class commissions—elucidate the factor's seminal role in publicizing a certain architectural rubric. Hence, masses in society are manipulated and influenced by its elite – the very faction that rules them in collaboration as an allied circle. Owing to the intuition and private connections gained via his elite upbringing, the elite domestic realm was astutely employed by GB as a stepping stone for NR, to be subsequently applied to state commissions. The governing elites who were fond of GB's houses, commissioned him at the state level by using their political influence. Larger civic commissions were followed by mass popularity and acclaim from both home and abroad. The acclaim too was spear-headed by the elite stratum. On the other hand, VG's disapproval of elite ways compelled him to incline towards the less politically formidable middle-class. His domestic products for them neither won him substantial future commissions nor acclaim.

On the other hand, Ceylonese elites of influence did not embrace a rubric based on vernacular tradition due to their genuine belief of it as the one that best-represented country's national identity, within the process of fulfilling their social responsibility. The surviving post-independence elites—of either feudal or bourgeoisie origins—were obsessed with creating a nostalgic niche for their own, through a rubric that best-epitomized the defunct architectural traditions of Ceylon's past, from medieval and colonial heydays of their ancestors. Perhaps, this was conceived as a means of creating a new social division. In this light, it is discernible in relation to VG's approach that just because a certain architectural rubric threatens to topple the elite system, it still would not succeed in contexts as Sri Lanka with a strong cultural base. Thus, the traditional archaic becomes indispensable in such situations.

References

- Bhabha, K. H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London :Routledge.
- Beng, T. H. (1994) *Tropical Architecture and Interiors: Tradition-based Design of Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore-Thailand*, Singapore: Page One Publishing Pte. Ltd.
- Bottomore, T. (1993) *Elite and Society*, London: Routledge.

- Clifford, J. (1987) "Of Other People's: Beyond the Savage Paradigm", in Hal Foster (ed.) *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Seattle :Bay Press.
- De Silva, N. (2009) *Dharavadaya, Marxwadaya ha Jathika Mathawada*, [online], Available: <http://www.kalaya.org/files/d090215.pdf> [29 June 2010].
- De Silva, N. (2006) *Pandu Abha saha Jathiye Vikashaya*, [online], Available: <http://www.kalaya.org/audio10.html> [26 May 2010].
- De Silva, N. (2006) *Sinhalayage Parinamaya*, [online], Available: <http://www.kalaya.org/audio5.html> [26 May 2010].
- De Silva, T. K. N. P. (1990) 'The Sri Lankan Tradition for Shelter', *The Journal of Sri Lanka Institute of Architects*, Vol 10, No 6.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2002) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspective*, 2nd Edition, London: Pluto Press.
- Fry, M. and Drew, J. (1982) *Tropical Architecture in the Dry and Humid Zones*, 2nd Edition, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company.
- Gunasekara, V.K. (2011) [Interview Comments] Mar 16.
- Hobsbawn, E. and Ranger, T. (1983) "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", *The Intervention of Tradition*, Cambridge :Cambridge University Press.
- Jayewardene, I. S. (1983-84) *The work of Geoffrey Bawa: Some Observations Towards a Historical Understanding*, M.Sc. Dissertation, University College London: History of Modern architecture.
- King, A. D. (1984) *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Plc.
- Lewcock, R. Sansoni, B., and Senanayake, L. (2002) *The Architecture of an Island: The Living Heritage of Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Barefoot (PVT) Ltd.
- Lim, W. S. W. and Beng, T. H. (1998) *Contemporary Vernacular; Evoking Traditions in Asian Architecture*, Singapore: Select Books Pte. Ltd.
- Mandel, E. (1982) *Introduction to Marxism*, London: Pluto Pres Ltd.
- Mills, L. A. (1964) *Ceylon under British Rule*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Mosca, G. (1939) *The Ruling Class*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Pareto, V. (1960) *A Treatise on General Sociology*, New York: Dover.
- Peiris, A., 2007. *Imagining Modernity: The Architecture of Valentine Gunasekara*, Sri Lanka : Stamford Lake (Pvt) Ltd.
- Perera, M. C. N. (1994) "Decolonizing Ceylon: Society and Space in Sri Lanka", PhD Thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton: Department of History and Theory of Art and Architecture.
- Rapoport, A. (1969) *House Form and Culture*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs.
- Roberts. M. (1995) *Cast Conflict and Elite Formation: The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka 1500-1931*, New Delhi: Navarang (in collaboration with Lake House Bookshop).
- Robson, D. (with Gormley, A. and Sonawane, D.) (1982) *Aided-Self-Help Housing in Sri Lanka: 1977 to 1982*, A Report prepared for the Overseas Development Administration of the United Kingdom, London: HMSO.
- Robson, D. (2002) *Geoffrey Bawa; the Complete Works*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- Rybczynski, W. (1988) *Home: Short History of an Idea*, London: Heinemann.

- Rykwert, J. (1982) *The Necessity of Artifice*, London: William Clowes (Beccles) Ltd.
- Scriver, P. and Prakash, V. (2007) *Colonial Modernities: Building, dwelling and architecture in British India and Ceylon*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Tzonis A. and Lefaivre L., (2001) "Regionalism and Tropicalism after 1945", *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalization*, West Sussex :Wiley Academy.
- Wijetunge, M. N. R. (2007) *Evolution of Elite Domestic Architecture from British to decolonization, with special reference to Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka*, unpublished M.Sc. Dissertation, University of Moratuwa: Department of architecture.
- Wijetunge, M. N. R. (2011) 'Kandyan Elitism as an Eastern Brand of Elitism and Formulating Kandyan Elite Domestic Architecture', *The Journal of Sri Lanka Institute of Architects*, Vol 09-10, No 01-02.
- Williams, R. (1980) *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London.
-

Nishan Rasanga Wigetunga is a Doctoral Candidate at the School of Design and the Built-environment, Nottingham Trent University, UK. He studied at the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka and has published on grand tradition and architectural practices in Sri Lanka. He can be contacted at n_wijetunge@hotmail.com
