

“Lunuganga - The Story of a Garden”

David Robson

In 1949, soon after Sri Lanka had gained its independence, a young man started to make a garden. For its setting he chose an abandoned rubber estate straddling two low hills on a promontory which juts out into the Dedduwa Lake, a sleepy backwater of the Bentota River. A mile away to the west the waves of the Indian Ocean roll in over the coral reef and break on to a white sandy beach fringed with coconut palms. To the east beyond the serried ranks of rubber-clad hills and rice-carpetted valleys, lies the mysterious Sinharaja, Sri Lanka's only remaining area of primeval rain forest. This is the wettest region of Sri Lanka and its most fertile, a vast hothouse of exotic trees and plants.

Today the garden is in its prime, but, after the passage of more than forty monsoons, Sri Lanka has lost its innocence and the young man has grown old. As he sits on a terrace above the rice paddy and surveys his handiwork he reflects on the inevitability of what he has produced: perhaps the garden had simply been waiting there to be discovered beneath its canopy of jungle. But this is a work of art, not of nature: it is the contrivance of one mind and a hundred pairs of hands working with nature to produce something which is 'supernatural'. Forests have been felled and new trees planted, hills have been

moved and terraces cut. The original estate bungalow has been turned inside out, and the hill has been liberally sprinkled with pavilions, walls and statues.

The garden is called 'Lunuganga', which in Sinhala means 'salt river'. In its previous incarnations it had been a Dutch cinnamon plantation and a British rubber estate and, like many of Sri Lanka's landscapes, it is a man-made creation. But now it has taken on a life of its own: it is a living organism, changing with the weather, with the time of day, with the seasons, with the passing of the years.

The man who has been both Lunuganga's creator and guardian is called Geoffery Bawa. He was born in 1919 in what was then the British Colony of Ceylon and grew up in that tolerant, cultured and cosmopolitan society which once thrived on the shady verandahs of Colombo's leafy suburbs.

Bawa belongs to a generation of artists whose lives spanned across the independence divide, among them the painters George Keyt and Manjusri, the dancers Chitrasena and Vajira, the designers Ena de Silva and Barbara Sansoni, and the architect Minette de Silva. Born into an open and pluralistic society they came together from every corner of Sri Lanka's ethnic maze, and, inspired by a growing appreciation of

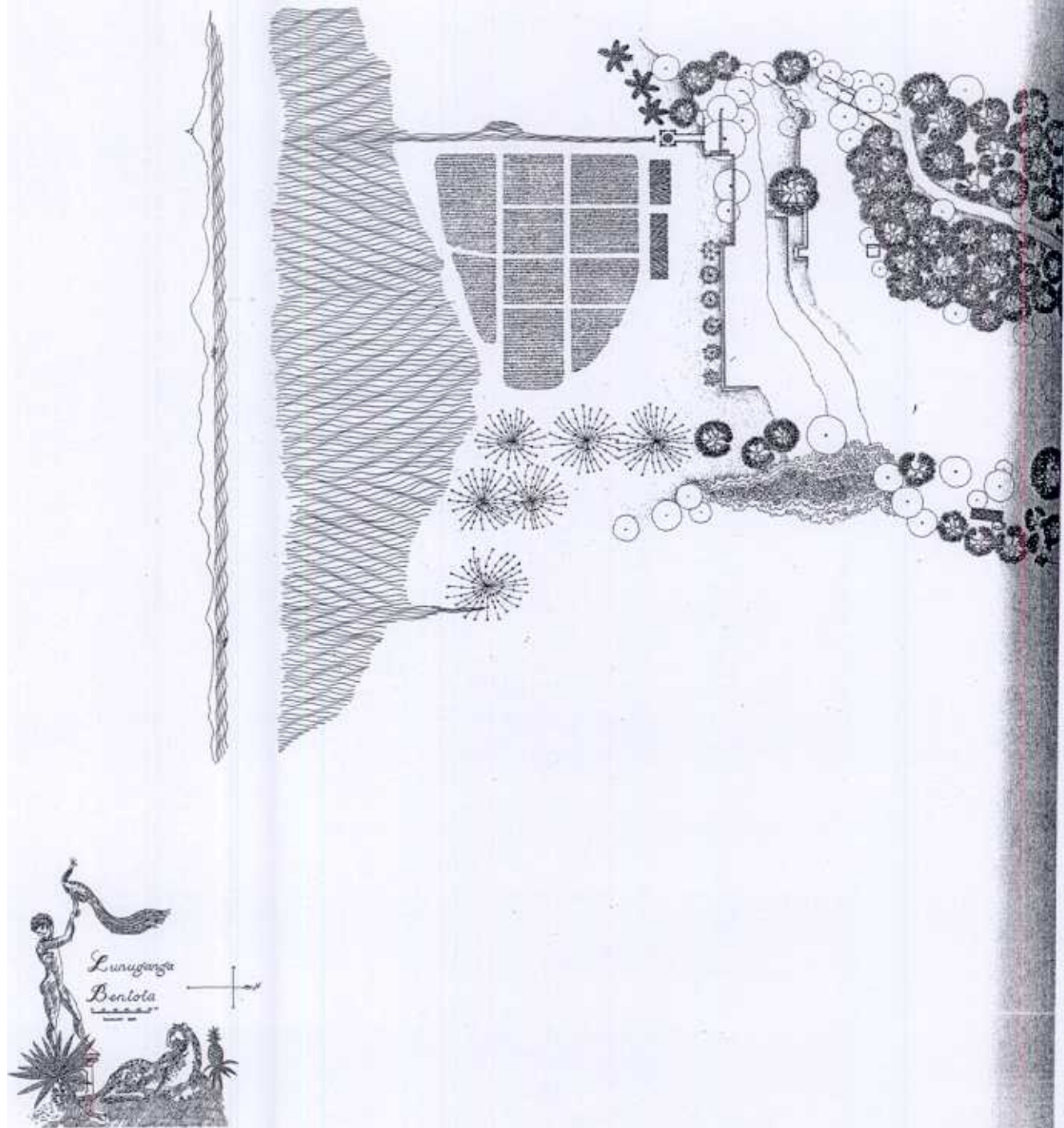
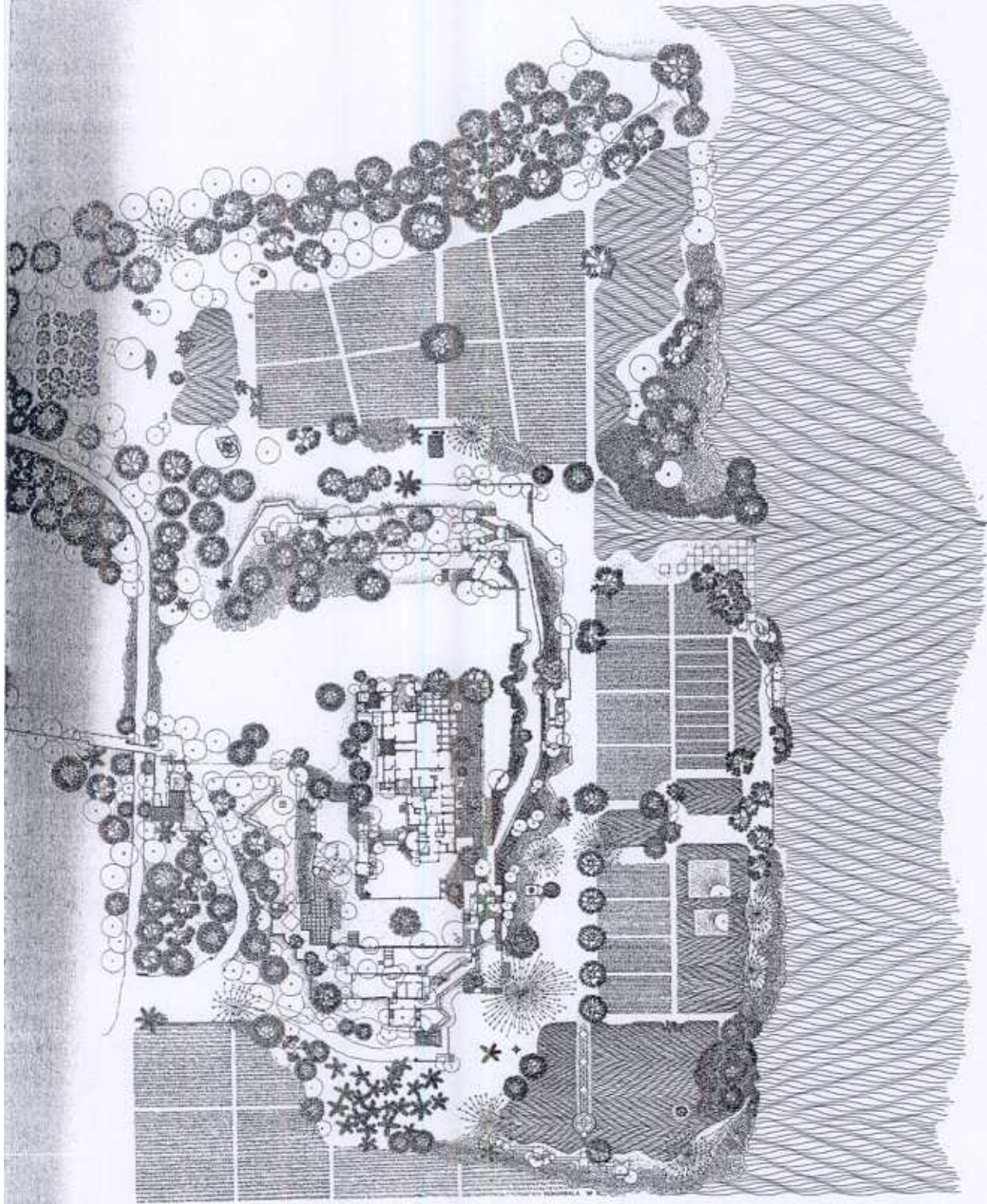


Fig 1. Plan of Lunuganga



the diversity and depth of their own history and culture, they worked at their art to discover ways of making and doing things which would be both new and vital and yet at the same time essentially Sri Lankan.

As a young man Bawa studied English and Law at Cambridge in the late 1930s and was called to the Bar in London in 1943. Having spent some time travelling in Europe and America he returned home just as Sri Lanka regained its independence.

In 1949 when he bought Lunuganga his aim was to turn the estate bungalow into a weekend house, and to create around it a tropical evocation of the great renaissance gardens of Europe. This ambitious project awakened his interest in architecture but he soon realised that his knowledge was no match for his imagination and he returned to Britain to study at the Architectural Association School in London.

When he finally qualified as an architect in 1956 he was already 37 years old. After travelling in Europe he returned to Colombo in 1958 and became principal partner in the near moribund architectural practice of Edwards, Reid and Begg. Since then Geoffrey Bawa has been astonishingly prolific. His portfolio of work has encompassed religious, social, cultural, educational, governmental, commercial and residential buildings, and he has established a comprehensive range of prototypes in each of these areas.

It is difficult to sum up or evaluate the work of an artist who, though close to the end of his career, is still active as a designer and builder. But we can say with some certainty of Geoffrey Bawa that he has exerted a decisive influence on the emerging architecture of the

newly independent Sri Lanka and that his buildings and ideas have been taken as exemplars by a whole generation of young Sri Lankan architects.

His architecture is a subtle blend of modern and traditional, of east and west, of formal and picturesque: he exploits the climate and the fertility of his native land in order to break down the artificial separation of inside from outside; he draws on every twist and turn of his country's colourful history to create an architecture which is fitting to its place, but he also scours the world for ideas to inform an architecture which is of its time.

Two projects probably hold the key to an understanding of Bawa's work: the garden at Bentota which he has continued to fashion for over 40 years and his own house in Colombo. Both have been many years in the making, both have served as test beds for his theories and ideas, both take an existing context as their starting point. The two act as complementary opposites: the town house is a haven of peace locked away within the busy city, an infinite garden of the mind constructed like a Rubic Cube on a tiny urban plot; the garden at Bentota, in contrast, in a distant retreat, an outpost on the edge to the known world, which challenges the infinite horizon of the ocean to the west and the endless switchback of hills to the east and which reduces this vast open landscape to a controlled series of outdoor rooms, a civilised garden within the larger garden wilderness of Sri Lanka.

Bawa's house in Colombo is an essay in architectural bricolage. In 1958 he bought the third of four small bungalows which lay along a short cul de sac at the end of a narrow suburban lane and converted it into a pied-a-terre with

living room, bedroom, tiny kitchen and room for a servant. When the fourth house became vacant it was converted to serve as a dining room and second living room. Finally in 1968 the first two houses of the row were bought and added into the composition. At this stage the first house was demolished and replaced by a 4 storey structure incorporating a ground floor flat for visitors, a first floor library, a second floor garden terrace, and a third floor roof terrace. The result is an introspective labyrinth of rooms and garden courts which together create the illusion of infinite space on what is a tiny urban plot. Words like inside and outside lose all meaning: here are rooms without roofs, and roofs without walls, all of them connected by a matrix of internal vistas.

Although the final plan is the result of a process of accretion which has exploited all sorts of visual accidents, there is also a strong sense of structured composition. The visitor is drawn in along the long entrance corridor by a pool of light framed by two columns and then turns onto a cross axis which is again terminated by a small open court, before finally meeting the main longitudinal axis which runs from the principle bedroom to the furthest garden court.

It the main body of the house is an evocation of a lost world of verandahs and courtyards assembled from a rich palette of traditional materials and plundered artifacts; the new pavilion is nothing less than a reworking of le Corbusier's Maisom Citrohan, a skilful manipulation of interpenetrating volumes created by plain abstract surfaces, rising vertically to an upper roof terrace which gives views across the neighbouring treetops and roofs towards the sea. Here is proof that old and new can

exist as complementary parts of the same whole: the low horizontals of the traditional pitch-roofed bungalow are enhanced by the three dimensional gymnastics of the cubist pavilion.

The Colombo house offers a contrasting prelude to the experience of the Bentota garden and together they exemplify Palladio's advice to the burghers of Vicenza in his Four Books of Architecture¹:

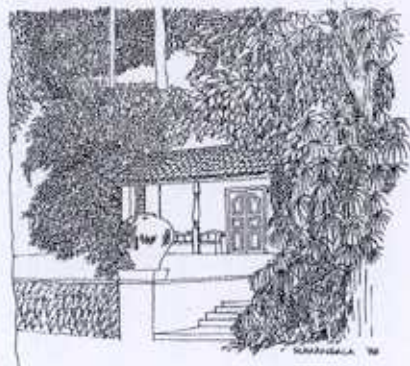
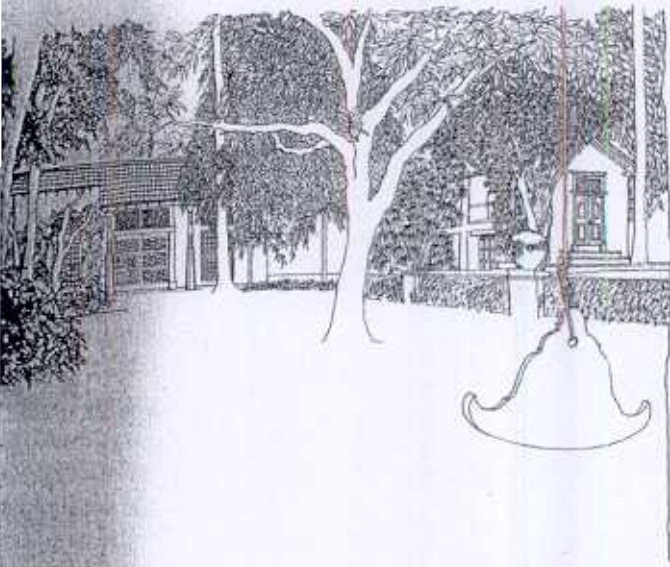
A city house is certainly of great splendour and conveniency to a gentleman who is to reside there all the time he shall require for directing his own affairs. But perhaps he will not reap much less utility from a country house; where the remaining part of the time will be passed in the art of agriculture, improving his estate, and where the mind, fatigued by the agitations of the city, will be greatly restored and comforted. Hence it was the ancient sages commonly used to retire to such like places; where being oftentimes visited by their virtuous friends, having houses, gardens, fountains and such pleasant places, they could easily attain to as much happiness as can be attained here below.

In the beginning there was an undistinguished estate bungalow sitting on the top of a low hill within in its 25 acres of rubber and enjoying only restricted views out northwards across the Dedduwa Lake. . . .

Since that time a new vista has been opened up southwards across the lower half of the Dedduwa Lake towards a distant Buddhist temple. This has been achieved by cutting a broad swathe through the rubber trees and removing a large section of the neighbouring hill. At the same time the old estate road which ran in the dip between the two hills to serve a neighbouring property



Fig 2. *Panorama of Eastern Terraces*



has been hidden within a ha-ha. The view from the southern entrance terrace is now contained by carefully shaped side fringes of trees and is framed in the middle distance by a moonamal tree and a large urn which mark the summit of Cinnamon Hill. The eye runs down and up through a cone of space and leaps out from Cinnamon Hill towards the temple and the sky.

The bungalow itself still survives, though it is now cocooned, in a manner reminiscent of the famous Maduwanwela Walauwwa, within a collection of new appendages: verandahs, porches, rooms, courtyards, out-houses. The area beyond the kitchens and servants quarters to the east and south of the house, has been transformed into a series of interconnected outdoor rooms, the Eastern Terraces formed by the guest house, the garden room and the sculpture gallery. To the west of the house an open lawn leads to a series of shady terraces which drop down into the 'Field of Jars', a valley which opens out northwards to the edge of the lake.

To the north, the wide band of marshy ground which separates the north side of the hill from the edge of the lake has been formed into a water meadow and divided into a checker board of rice paddy squares. Between water meadow and hill the 'Broad Walk' runs from the pavilion at the eastern boundary of the garden, across the lily ponds, along the base of the hill and across the end of the Plain of Jars creating the one obviously formal element of the composition. The north face of the hill has been cut back to form a rocky cliff along which threads the 'Middle walk', a shady promenade connected by stone staircases upwards towards the main lawns and downwards towards the Broad Walk.

All of this has been achieved on a piece of land which measures barely 500 metres across the peninsula from edge of lake to edge of lake, and 300 metres from east to west along the Broad Walk. The limits of this garden can be inspected by a brisk walker within fifteen minutes, though a complete exploration of every corner might take a day, and anyone who one wanted to experience its varying moods would be better advised to set aside the whole of a week.

Over the years the original rubber trees have been replaced progressively by a wide variety of more traditional plants. But this is a civilised wilderness, not a garden of flowers and fountains. It is a composition in monochrome, green on green, an ever changing play of light and shade, a succession of hidden surprises and stunning vistas, a landscape of memories and ideas.

Here is no orgy of topiary and bric a brac with *trees cut to statues, statues thick as trees*². Works of art are carefully placed to form objects for contemplation, punctuation marks on routes, pointers or distance beacons. A leopard lies in the dappled shade beside the lake, a young boy stands on the edge of the garden terrace, pointing out the view to those above, beckoning to those below, a grotesque Pan grins up from the edge of the paddy.

The various pavilions and terraces which have been constructed down the years appear now simply to have grown out of the ground. The carefully restored remnants of some earlier period of occupation. Today Lunuganga can be read as a palimpsest, a manuscript upon which a whole series of messages have been superimposed.

A garden is not a static object: it is a moving spectacle changing with the



Fig 4. *View of the lake and island beyond the Araliya tree (Plumeria Obtusa) on the Upper Terrace*

time of day, the season, the mood, the point of view. And so Lunuganga has been conceived as a series of separate contained spaces, to be moved through at leisure, or to be occupied at particular times.

The voyage of discovery really begins on the doorstep of the house at Bagatelle Road in Colombo whence the car sets out on its harrowing forty mile journey along the busy coast road which leads to Galle. At the 38th mile post we reach the town of Alutgama and cross the estuary of the Bentota River on a long low bridge. On our right the Bentota Beach Hotel, the first of Sri Lanka's new tourist hotels, and still its best by far, reminds us that we are entering Bawaland.

At Bentota we turn inland and, after a couple of miles, reach a narrow cause way which crosses the Dedduwa Lake. Here on the right we catch our first glimpse of the northern terraces of Lunuganga on the opposite shore. This chance encounter is reminiscent of Kent's device at Stowe, where the visitor first views the south front of the house in the distance across the lake, but is then taken around through the trees to arrive, totally confused, at the main entrance on the north side.

And so it is at Lunuganga: we disappear back into the trees and must negotiate two more junctions before finding a narrow track which leads across a rice paddy towards a thickly wooded hill. Here the main route seems to draw the visitor straight ahead, but this way leads to the sunken ha-ha: only the most observant will spot the real driveway darting away up the hill to the right. Two more steep turns and the car arrives at a gravel platform under a dense canopy of trees. From the car park we

climb up a short flight of steps to the first terrace. On the right the guest wing bridges over the pavement which links through to the Eastern Terraces, while ahead a welcoming loggia indicates the broad flight of steps which carry us upwards and turn us on to the south terrace of the main house.

Nothing thus far has prepared us for the astonishing view of the Cinnamon Hill and the distant temple which suddenly confronts us as we pause before entering through the main door of the house. It is as if, in a game of Blind Man's Buff, we've been spun around and around and suddenly the blindfold has been removed: all our senses are confused and we've been transported to the very centre of a magic world.

Entering the house from the south terrace we cross via a long passage to the main sitting room and out into a spacious loggia where a magnificent temple tree frames a new vista, opening out towards the lake and the island. Lawns run north and west to the edge of the hill from where there are views down on to the Field of Jars and the water meadows.

The house lies at the hub of the composition, and it is the only point from which all of the individual parts can be comprehended. From its terraces we can set out in any direction and assemble the various elements of the garden into an infinite number of different spatial sequences. We can explore the Eastern Terrace with its studio and sculpture gallery and then move back westwards along the Middle Walk, lingering for a while in the stone pavilion before dropping down, the Field of Jars. We can climb the Cinnamon Hill and descend to the edge of the southern part of the lake, returning via the water tower through the

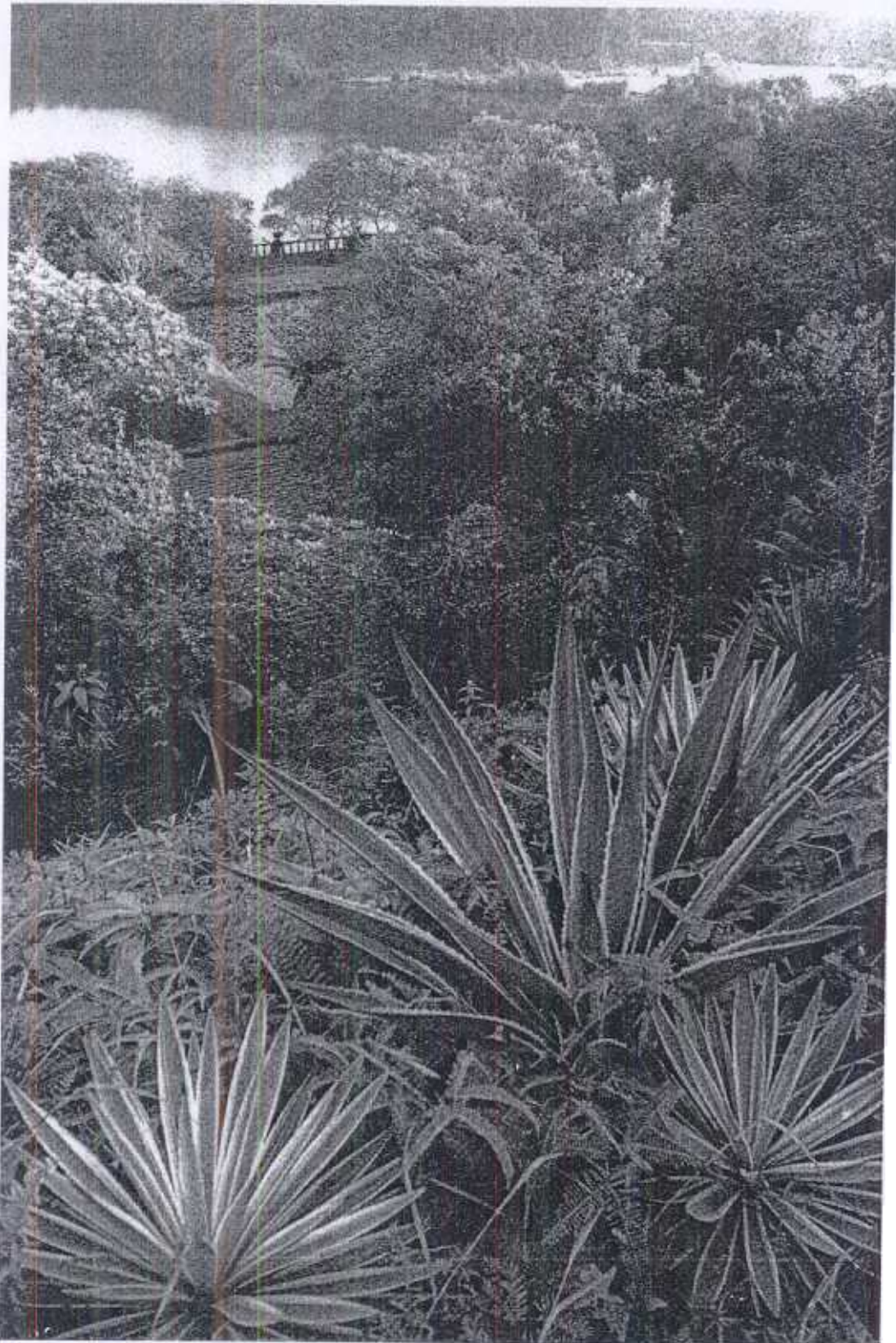


Fig 5. *The Water Gate and the Lakeside Terrace from the Upper Terrace*

trees to the Field of Jars. We can drop down from the Eastern Terraces to the lily ponds and sit for a while in the Black Pavilion before promenading along the Broad walk beside the water Meadows to end up sitting beside the sleepy leopard at the Water Gate. Or we can throw caution to the winds and head off westwards beyond the Cadju Tree Terrace to explore those parts of the peninsula which have yet to be colonised.

Conceptually the garden at Bentota probably owes more to the great gardens of renaissance Italy and 18th century England than it does to the Mogul gardens of India, and yet it uses these European models to create an essentially Asian experience. Again and again we are reminded of Pope's advice to the young Lord Burlington:

*To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,
To swell the Terrace, or to sink the Grot,
In all, let Nature never be forgot.
But treat the Goddess like a modest fair,
Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare,
Let not each beauty ev'ry where be spy'd,
There half the skill is decently to hide.
He gains all points, who pleasingly confounds,
Surprises, varies, and conceals the Bounds.*

It is tempting to see Bawa as a sort of latter day Burlington, and Lunuganga as his Chiswick Villa. Here he has held court, drawing together a circle of painters, designers, and architects and plotting with them to write a new chapter in the history of Sinhalese art and architecture. The garden may well have

been inspired by the great gardens of Europe, and particularly by English gardens such as Stourhead and Stowe, but it is still fresh and vital while they are now nothing more than the fossilised remains of something which once was great. It is still what they once were: a private place for private enjoyment, a place for contemplation, a place for gatherings of friends. Above all else it is a very beautiful and moving work of art and nature.

Today the garden seems to be so natural, so established, that it is hard to appreciate just how much effort has gone into its creation. Vast quantities of earth have been moved, fully grown trees and shrubs have been imported, branches have been carefully weighed down with stones to train them: nothing exists now which has not either consciously been allowed to remain in place, or been introduced deliberately into the composition. And the project is not complete: hardly a year has passed since 1949 without some new element being added, some new area being colonised.

Nor is it immediately apparent just how much maintenance work is needed. Ignore the garden for a week and the paths and staircases will clog up with leaves, ignore it for a month and the lawns will run wild, ignore it for a year and the terraces will start to crumble; after two or three years the jungle will return and after five years the garden will be lost for ever. But this process of maintenance is not something mechanical which can be given out to sub-contractors or organised by a committee in Colombo. It requires the constant vigilance of a creative eye, of the eye of the man who has made it.

Now, when Geoffrey Bawa sits on his terrace at Lunuganga and watches the sun go down across the Dedduwa

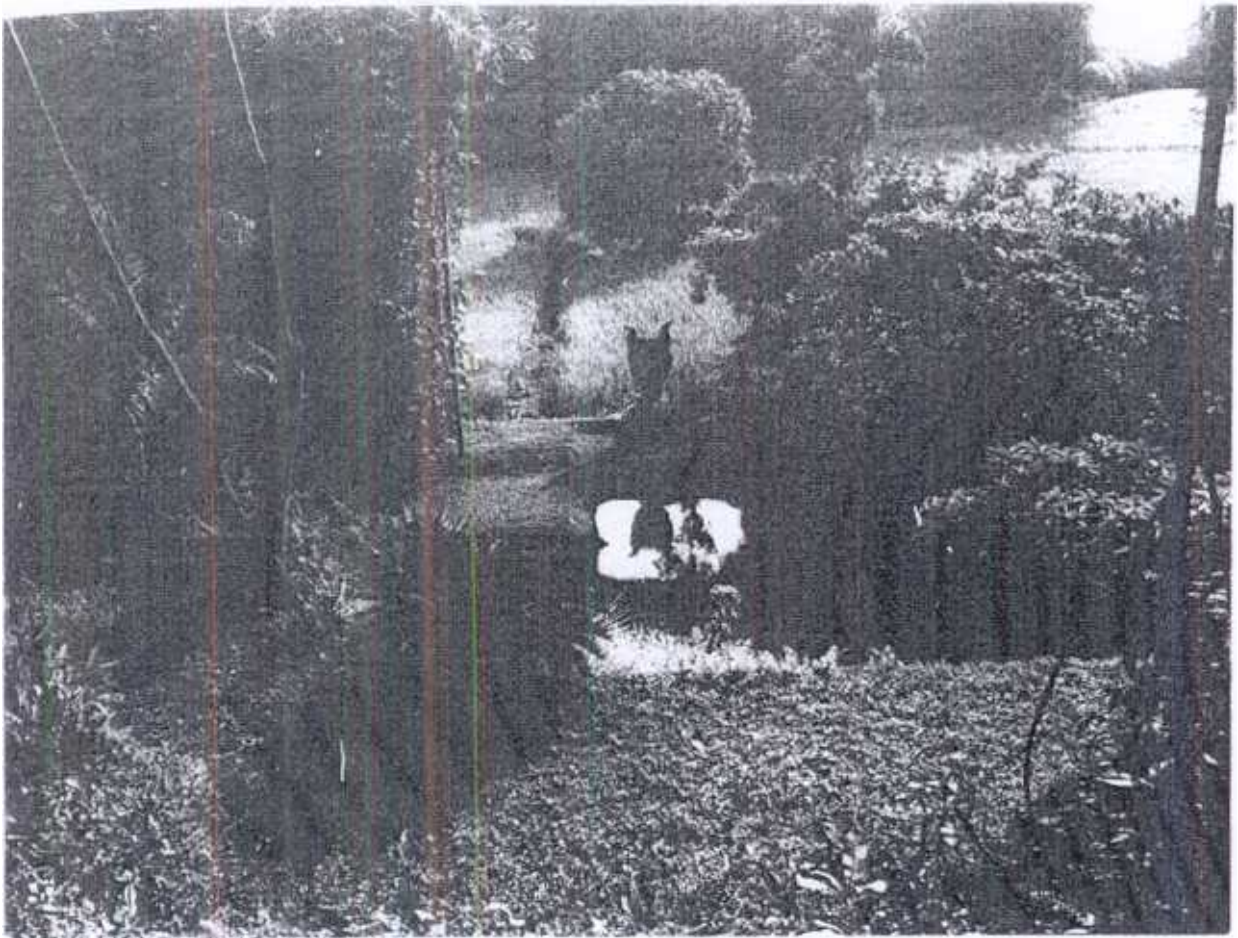




Fig 7. *The Entrance Veranda from the Southern Terrace of the Main House.*



Juchim.

Lake, he may ask himself what will become of this magic world which has taken a lifetime to create. Ought it to be frozen and preserved, a national monument maintained by a commission of bureaucrats, to be trampled over by thousands of souvenir hunting tourists? Might it perhaps be turned into a study centre and allowed slowly to develop and change under the watchful eyes of a succession of guardians? It would certainly be better to allow it quickly to be swallowed up by jungle than to see it turned into a travesty of its former self.

References

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2. Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Lord Burlington* Collected Poems, Penguin 1971.

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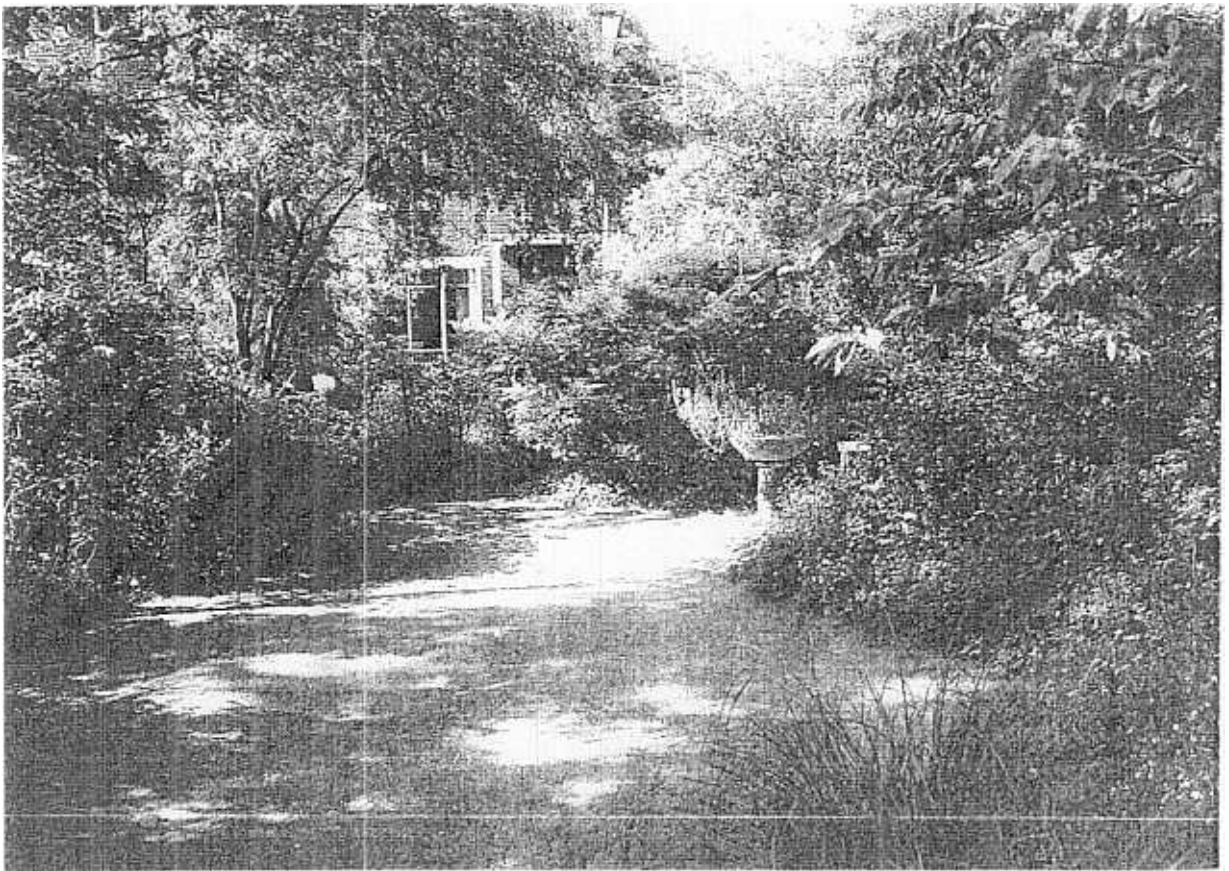


Fig. 1. The soft patch of lawn surrounded by meandering herbaceous borders, serpentine paths running round an island bed and a pretty fountain spilling into a tily pond, a small gazebo, and even a tiny grotto shrouded in ivy, are some of the features of this enchanting Victorian garden.