

# The elements of style

The work of master architect Geoffrey Bawa is inspired by the easy vibe of life in Sri Lanka

:: KALYANI PRASHER

The best old buildings that remain in Sri Lanka “all look at life in Ceylon squarely in the face”, Geoffrey Bawa had once famously said. The grand old man of architecture clearly carried forward that ethos in his own work, especially when it came to building his beautiful and expansive home in Bentota, the Lunuganga Estate. Built to take in the views, maximise rain water, and enjoy the natural greenery, Lunuganga is a tropical modern paradise, a pleasure to walk through and take in the beautiful gardens at leisure, like Bawa did. He built a hundred different sheds and view-points all through the gardens, to write here, to work there, to sup with a view of the sea, to breakfast under the trees... the man liked his luxury, that’s for sure.

He’d have been a hundred years old in two years, but Bawa’s design sensibility will never age: when you make the elements part of your design, it’s unlikely to go out of fashion. All through the Lunuganga Estate, his country home and his first muse (he was attracted by the gardens here in 1947, which is when he quit being a lawyer and took to architecture), you can see this sensibility show up.

The six suites are all separate cottages camouflaged with greenery, simple clean lines that don’t have to stand out to impress, because the outdoors are so beautiful and the big windows do all the work. In fact, the Glass Room has walls entirely made of glass! It’s a fantastic space, a bridge across the portico, its glass walls showing as much or as little as the occupant desires. I could see a delicious rattan armchair and trademark black-and-white patterns. You don’t have to study too much of his work to conclude that Bawa’s tools were wood, rattan, natural light, greenery and bold black-and-white... floors, linen, cushions, frames, photographs, anything in black-and-white.

At my hotel, Anantara Kalut-



A view to a thrill At Anantara Kalutara • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

.....  
**White, brown, green, mud – colours that complement Nature – are seen most in Sri Lanka’s architecture**

ara, just an hour ahead of Lunuganga, I was delighted to meet this signature Bawa design assembly. The high wooden roof, the big rattan chairs, huge picture windows, an easy vibe full of natural light... yes, this could be no one else. The lobby of Anantara Kalutara, a new luxury hotel with 141 rooms, fabulous food and landscaping, was indeed designed by the great Sri Lankan architect – commissioned by the tourism depart-

Anantara Kalutara (<http://kalutara.anantara.com>) will arrange for a trip to Lunuganga for you. For details, [www.geoffreybawa.com/lunuganga-country-estate/virtual-garden-tour](http://www.geoffreybawa.com/lunuganga-country-estate/virtual-garden-tour)  
It’s always hot in the day in Sri Lanka, so carry a hat and good walking shoes.

.....

ment. The building was stopped midway in the 1990s due to the escalating war and, later, a lot of it was destroyed in the tsunami. Thankfully, the central portion was intact; the rest of the resort was then completed based on his design. Just the lobby area is a huge attraction, with unmatched views of a private river and lagoon, though from elsewhere in the hotel you can see both the Indian Ocean and the Kalu Ganga river.

I did say it’s hard to go wrong if you build Nature into your design plan, but it’s easier said than done. Beautiful and still untouched, clean and uncluttered, I saw Geoffrey Bawa’s sensibility mirrored in tea estates, and even small villages, where houses don’t try to stand out, but rather blend into the natural beauty. White, brown, green, mud – colours that complement Nature – are seen most in architecture around the island. The people of Sri Lanka have clearly learned to look at life in Ceylon in the face very early, and are not about to let that learning go in a hurry.

The writer was at Anantara Kalutara at the invitation of the hotel