

# THE BERKELEY PRIZE

## ESSAY COMPETITION 2009

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*How could a lost social tradition in your culture, once elegantly expressed through sustainable architectural design or building practices, be revived and why should it be?*

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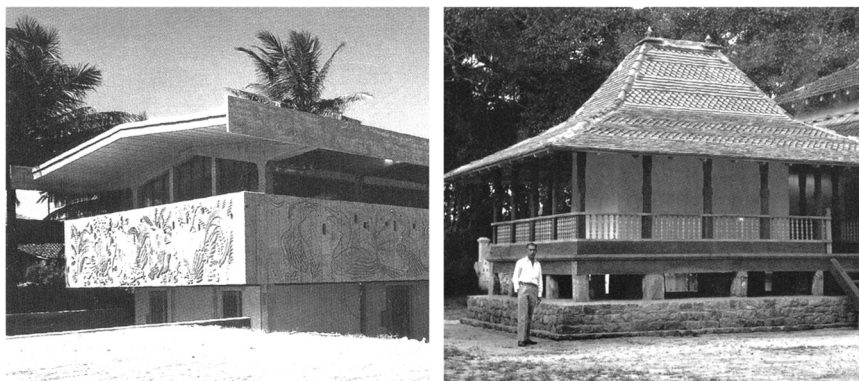
### Instances of the liminal

By Kan-chane Gunawardena

The 'liminal' is described as the threshold between an inner-realm and the beyond. In its simplest spatial representation, it is the notional 'plane' that divides an inner atmosphere from the outer 'other'. With more complex spatial representations, this plane is expanded to present varying atmospheres of their own descriptions. In the common tongue these are referred to as verandas, porticos, loggias, courts, and the like. Although their specific atmospheric experiences differ, their universal purpose is to present the engaged subject with a relatedness with both the inner and outer-realms. This essay examines such liminal representations in traditional Sri Lankan dwellings and their significance to a modern interpretation of 'dwelling'.

All spatial atmospheres and the events that occur within them present psychic meanings. With time such meanings may be gathered and communicated to succeeding generations with psychic symbols. These symbols are the ingredients of a 'tradition', an acknowledged set of collective principles with value to succeeding generations. We relate to a tradition by interpreting the meanings of such symbols. A psychic symbol is therefore a representation that in everyday life is familiar to us, yet possesses specific deep-rooted meanings in addition to its conventional and apparent associations. Such symbols through their presence strive to unite the engaging 'subject' with their

collective 'heritage'. The comprehension of this engagement not only presents 'meaning' to their immediate state of dwelling, but also facilitates individual psychic development; a process that Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung described as 'individuation'. The phenomenology of the liminal signals imminent change to the subject that both defuses inhibitions and heightens their faculties of conscious and unconscious perception. How the subject engages with the symbols encountered determines the path of comprehension taken and the individuation achieved. The liminal atmospheres themselves may act as a 'trigger' or call to engage. A portico could thus enable an extraverted engagement with the outer world, while a loggia or courtyard accommodate introspection. This engagement may be further heightened by the specific symbols enshrined within such atmospheres. The universal-to-specific meanings that such atmospheres present in their experience however varies for each collective psyche, as well as the individual subject. A tradition seeks to gather the meanings of value to their collective, and communicate through conscious deliberation and unconscious mechanisms, the primordial discoveries that has led to the collective's psychic advancement.



*Plate 1. Bawa's 'Tropical Modernism' at St. Thomas's Preparatory School, 1957-64 (left); and Bawa's photograph of the Maduwela Temple (right); plates from Robson (2002).*

In the historical context of Lankan building and dwelling, the traditional housebuilder constructed liminal atmospheres to facilitate a reciprocal relationship with the natural world. The evidence of their considered usage was confirmed in the early part of the twentieth century by the discovery of foundations belonging to several courtyard houses that had been deemed to belong to early settlers of the

ancient city of Anuradhapura (fifth century BCE to 1017 CE). Analysis of subsequent developments in domestic arrangements had presented evidence to suggest that the 'courtyard-manor-house' typology emerged as the dominant and established tradition of the time (in terms of constructions directed by the skill and craftsmanship of a master-builder). Since then, the typology evolved over centuries of refinements to subsequent traditions and periods of vernacular building. A significant account of such later domestic arrangements in relation to the seventeenth century Kandian tradition was offered by Robert Knox, a sailor of the British East India Company. Knox described the manor houses of the Kandian tradition, as 'handsome and commodious houses ... commonly of two buildings one opposite each other, joined on each side by a wall, which makes a square courtyard in the middle...'. The succeeding colonial traditions of building (up to the twentieth century CE) witnessed the fusion of western interpretations of liminal atmospheres with this established indigenous tradition. Portuguese and Dutch interpretations in particular had considerable influence on the design and organisation of the manor houses of the respective periods and thereafter.

The challenges of a tropical climate must be addressed to sustain an agreeable dwelling. Observations of the various traditions of Lankan building reveals the oversailing roof to be an unchanging feature in this regard. This building element would have been so constructed by the original housebuilders to shield against the relentless onslaught of the monsoon and defend the walls from the threat of erosion. The primacy of this protective function meant that it ascended as a defining morphological feature of the dwellings of this isle. With the pragmatic extension of the roof, the open yet sheltered space between the inside and the outside that resulted would have naturally presented itself as an opportunity for new modes of dwelling. This would have been encouraged further by the discovery of the opportunity to better ventilation and regulate the thermal climate of the inner realm. With this satisfactory regulation of the microclimate, such liminal spaces would have in turn presented the opportunity for a deeper reconciliation of the tasks of the inner world with that of the outer. A potent psychic association would have thereafter engrained itself into the collective language and practices of building and dwelling.

The traditional approach to dwelling has been defined by the need for a dialogue between the dweller and their natural surroundings. Nature was thus not deemed as something to be conquered, but engaged with and valued. This affinity with the natural also stems from a reverence to an ancient philosophy. As an island that had embraced the teachings of the Buddha, the inhabitants have long been aware of the significance of introspection and need for Self-discovery. The meditative state has thus been seen as an integral and essential act of dwelling, and best achieved through the phenomenological engagement with the natural context. The symbolic representation of this was exemplified to the collective by the life of the Buddha himself, where he had sought and achieved the highest state of consciousness of enlightenment by dwelling in contentment under the shelter of a fig tree. The practice of thought and meditation thus has long been associated with shelter and nature, with the liminal realm offering opportunity to engage. It is from this perspective that the traditional language of building in the isle evolved over two millennia to embrace the liminal realm as an integral and vital asset to their practices of dwelling.

This traditional perspective of dwelling however has experienced radical transformation over the past century of the island's development. The principal drivers behind this relate to the exponential growth in the island's population, and the relentless influx of external influences claiming to offer modernity. Scarcity in land supply has led to a notable reconsideration of the structural organisation of the modern abode. Liminal devices in such light have suffered indifference in response to the demand for spatial efficiency and economic return. The established preference for horizontal ordering has consequently given way to embrace verticality and condensed arrangements. In addition to addressing such spatial pressures, the influx of the 'international style' served to distort the dwelling aspirations of the modern-day house-builder. It presented islanders with the aspiration to desire purist geometries, where the liminal is reduced to a thin plane of wall or glass that offers only a blunt distinction between the inner and outer realms. Robert Venturi's assertion that architecture is 'the wall between the inside and outside' has thus gained significant authority in such modern interpretations of dwelling. The aspirations of these

modern dwellers have in turn cultivated the illusion that they are distinct and different from their natural environment. In some instances, the extent to which such segregation is employed has presented some with the belief that their constructed modernity is in every way superior to their natural surroundings. Stemming from such misconceptions, an inconsiderate attitude towards the environment has now resulted in a culture of building that is dependent on fossil-fuels and air-conditioned blocks to define their machinic dwelling.



*Plate 2. Mural of warriors by Laki Senanayake in the veranda of the small house at Lunuganga (left); and small bronze figure from the Vijayanagar Period (South Indian) located on the terrace at the northern entrance at Lunuganga (right); plates from Bawa, et al. (2006).*

The quest for efficiency is by no means an inauthentic endeavour. It is pertinent to seek efficiency to ensure that the little time we have results in a meaningful legacy that advances the collective psyche. What matters here is whether this quest for efficiency is gradually surmounting the spiritual primacy of dwelling; the truths that ancestors have understood and bequeathed for psychic advancement. Such pursuit of efficiency for the sake of efficiency would only lead to sustaining a meaningless existence. The question that dwellers must therefore answer for themselves is whether they are content with sustaining their existence simply for the sake of it, or whether they seek the true meaning of their 'relation to the world'. The search for individuation requires more than just an efficient approach to living. To understand the subject's relation to the world, the subject must have a comprehension of their existence in relation to their environment.

Sustainable living is therefore rooted in the 'attitude' adopted towards engagement with this environment. The liminal realm in such light serves as a constant reminder of the greater environment that exists beyond, and the need to engage in continual and reciprocal dialogue with it to define an agreeable and meaningful dwelling.

The idealised state of the house as a 'machine for living' has also been questioned in the west. Intellectual collectives such as 'Team X' and philosophers the likes of Martin Heidegger were extremely critical of this high-Modernist attitude and argued for a thoughtful approach to dwelling. In response to a post-war European housing crisis, Heidegger in particular believed 'unsettledness' as a fundamental source of anxiety in the world, and advocated an approach that aimed to provide a more 'rooted' dwelling. This critical assessment of Modernity eventually traversed to a subcontinental context, as many conscientious Lankan architects during the late 50s began to express concern at the requests received from patrons. One architect who found this to be a disturbing predicament was Geoffrey Bawa. After some experimentation with the Modernist agenda on his own part, he began to digress from the machinic approach principally influenced by the mediocre climate responsiveness that such arrangements realised. He claimed that: 'we have a marvellous tradition of building in this country that has got lost. It got lost because people followed outside influences over their own good instincts'. Bawa thus commenced a process of rediscovery that aimed to consider modern applications of forgotten traditions. Liminal devices in this regard presented to him a wealth of opportunities that could be adapted for a more compact and spiritual dwelling. He subsequently embarked upon two seminal projects, *Lunuganga*, his country estate in the southwest of the island, and *Thirty-third Lane*, his townhouse in the capital. Both projects were envisaged from onset as laboratories for continual experimentation and discovery. He soon developed a language of building that sought to unite the modern challenges of the city with the spiritual connectedness desired in provincial dwelling. The conscientious efforts to source his material and symbolism from the immediate surroundings grounded these works as being respectful to the situation as well as to its wider physical and spiritual context.



Plate 3. *Lunuganga*, south entrance veranda (left); and view through entrance portico (right).

The *Lunuganga* country estate was Bawa's first and longest experiment in attempting to identify the merits and deficits of open, sheltered, and enclosed atmospheres. The twenty-five-acre estate provided him with many opportunities to perfect the parameters that governed the construction of effective liminal atmospheres. The evidence of such experimentation is exemplified by the many verandas, porticos, loggias, and courtyards that are integrated to the constructions of this estate. He aimed there to perfect relationships with light and shadow; relatedness with the sky; direct and reflected associations, contact with water, earth, and terrain; and finally the effective placement of psychic symbols. The *Thirty-third Lane* townhouse on the other hand was appropriately sited to address the urban challenges of integrating liminal devices. The setting of the capital permits little opportunities for expansion. Boundaries are definitive, and compactness had become not a preference but a necessity by the 1960s. In its response to this setting, *Thirty-third Lane* sought not to contradict this urban reality. Spatial organisation is therefore truthfully compact, and in its plan presents itself much like a labyrinth of interconnected compartments. The main compartments of habitation, such as the bedrooms and the living and dining rooms, all have a proximity to some form of garden or court open to the heavens, while the cross-axial arrangement eventually leads the occupant to an open space of some description in all four directions. Differing from *Lu-*

*nuganga*, the peripheries of the site itself forms the boundaries of enclosed yet open spaces. In such instances, whether they correspond to the definition of a veranda, portico, loggia, or courtyard is obscured. Regardless of their precise definition, their universal purpose remains to unite the subject with the environment they inhabit.

The human condition seeks constant affirmation of its situation to dwell with contentment. This affirmation is typically conveyed to the subject by the perception and comprehension of their existence in relation to the earth and sky. The earth relates the subject to their rootedness with the environment (what they believe to be their known truths), while the sky relates them to temporal dynamics (the uncertainties of their existence). The ability to perceive such spatial and temporal dynamics must therefore be facilitated by any appropriate act of building. The liminal realm in such arrangements perform the vital task of uniting the subject with their wider environment and facilitating reciprocal interactions. The primordial house-builders discovered this spiritual, as well as other pragmatic merits and deemed it worthy of contributing to a long history of collective enrichment. The survival of such devices over two millennia of Lankan endeavours at building and contented dwelling suggests a deep-rooted psychic reverence to the phenomenology of such devices. With this long history of meaning in mind, it becomes an arduous and contentious task to discard such values without due consideration for the consequences. If efficiency and compactness is what is demanded of the modern city-dweller, the response should not be to disregard the liminal realm in favour of the liminal plane, but to adapt it to address these challengers. As architect Geoffrey Bawa had demonstrated with his translations from the provincial to the urban, the approach to the modern liminal realm should aim to satisfy the universal sentiment of 'relatedness with the environment', while providing an efficient and compact spatial organisation. His exemplar treatment of the liminal realm presents it as symbolising 'freedom', 'permeability', 'reconciliation', 'medium', and most of all, as a 'mediator' between two worlds. Manifested as courtyards, verandas, loggias, or porticos, they present the freedom of Self-determination to those who encounter such situations, which in turn enables them to experience a meaningful engagement with their natural habitat.



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