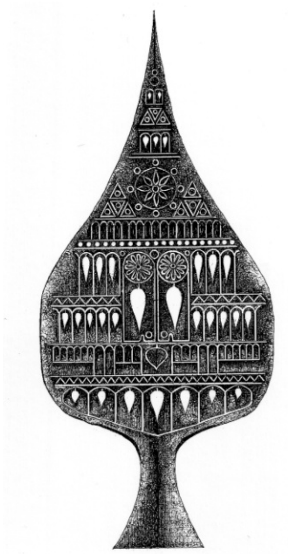


MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLS AS ORNAMENT IN THE WORKS OF

GEOFFREY BAWA

Kan-chane Gunawardena

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Mythological symbols as ornament in the works of Geoffrey Bawa

Kan-chane R. Gunawardena

Derived from the Ancient Greek word ***mȳthos***, 'myth' making describes 'storytelling'. It is often interpreted as a primitive endeavour in the explanation of the world and its relation to the human condition. The use of the expression 'primitive' in this interpretation carries with it negative association of it being an inferior endeavour (Lévi-Strauss, 1980). An individualist may concur and regard it as allegorical instructions of conformity, designed to shackle the free spirit of the individual to the traditions of a collective; while a pious traditionalist may regard it as god's revelation to his children and calling to conform to his will. In the East, metaphysician Ananda Coomaraswamy described it as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Campbell, 1993); while in the West, psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung considered it as a collective dream symptomatic of the archetypal[1] urges within the depths of the human psyche[2] (Jung, 1979). Myth could relate to all such descriptions as there is no universal consensus for its definition. As Joseph Campbell (1993) argued, the value of it is not in what it *is*, but more in how it functions.

Carl Jung believed mythological symbols to play a central role in comprehending our psychic heritage (Jung, 1975). He believed that it connected the conscious human being with the unconscious[3] heritage of the 'eternal human'. Myths therefore function as works of creative understanding of our psyche, and their goal is the reconciliation of the individual consciousness with this universal understanding (Jaspers, 1962). The unconscious reveals valuable potential to the conscious ego through the pictorial language of physical and psychic symbols (Campbell, 1993). Such symbols are vital communications from the unconscious that have a compensatory significance to our psyche, and are a necessary apparatus of the 'individuation process' (Jung, 1979), the lifelong developmental process 'by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual", that is a separate, indivisible unity or "whole"' (Jung, 1975). Jung claimed that our ability to make such symbols, both consciously and unconsciously, gives human beings their unique status in the kingdom of animals (Jung, 1979), with the symbolism presenting profound psychological significance (Campbell, 1993). Mythology is therefore an invaluable apparatus of psychic development, that discloses the human condition to themselves and their relation to the world in which they exist.

The capacity to 'mean', as Norberg-Schulz (1980) emphasised 'is a fundamental human need ... [and] a psychic function'. To assign meaning to a given condition of building[4] and dwelling[5], the subject seeks to 'visualise' their understanding of the world by building as a reflection, 'perfect' nature by adding their own improvements (e.g., enclosure), and 'symbolise' their discovered meanings as physical symbols (e.g., adornment) (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1980) believed that to 'mean' is to describe the ability to 'translate' an understanding into 'words of a different level'. Our understanding of building and dwelling is therefore signified and communicated to others by the representation of symbols that function as words with many different 'levels'. The primal objective of symbols thus has a metaphysical grounding. They could be presented as a word, name, image, or any form of representation that in everyday life is familiar, yet possess specific associations in addition to its conventional and apparent meaning. They imply something vague, unknown, and requiring interpretation, and have a wider 'unconscious' aspect that is never precisely defined, or fully explained. They are often produced consciously to represent concepts that are difficult to define such as spiritual emblems, but also produced unconsciously and spontaneously in dreams (Jung, 1979). An example of the value of symbolism is evident in the ornament of classical antiquity, where such physical symbols served as surface adornment that attracted attention and enquiry, which in turn enabled the communication of meanings on many different levels.

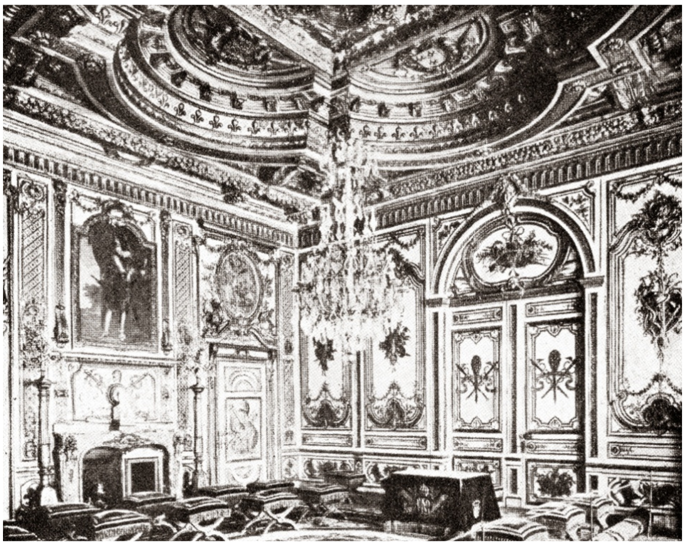


Plate 1. Château de Fontainebleau, where 'no surface was left plain to the eye'.

Subsequent traditions of building however considered adornment as having predominantly, and in some instances exclusively a surface level optical value. The acceptance that no surface should be left without visual appeal (e.g., Plate 1), and the emergence of pattern books, devalued ornamentation from its original symbolic purpose. The use of symbols was gradually replaced by 'signs', and finally by 'patterns'. While signs in the very least denoted something that had acquired recognisable meaning through common usage and conscious intent (Jung, 1979), patterns denoted only the repetitive use of a visually pleasing unit. The interpretation of such representations thus would reveal little purpose, other than their presence for the sake of visual delight.

Modernist critique considered such ornamentation as superfluous and wasteful. Architect Adolf Loos for example, presented an essay in 1908 titled as *Ornament and Crime*, that was deeply critical of the morality of such forms of adornment. Ornament without purpose to him was a waste of material and effort (Loos, 1998). Le Corbusier in his manuscript titled *The Decorative Art of Today* (1925), concurred and forwarded a clear distinction between a work of art and an object of utility. To him the decorative art of the day had resorted to camouflaging the shortcomings of man's creations, and argued that it could no longer be considered as 'compatible with the framework of contemporary thought' (Le Corbusier, 1987). He claimed that it is with 'art' that architecture must unite, with superficial ornamentation replaced by purposeful and meaningful art. He particularly admired what he described as the art of 'folk culture' as concrete symbols of man's understanding of the nature of life. In his later works from Ronchamp to the *Unité* projects, symbolic art gained significant integration and expression in his language of building (e.g., Plate 2).

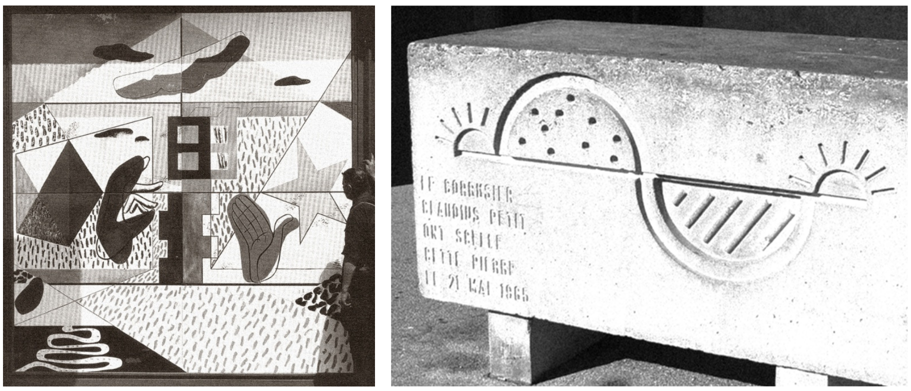
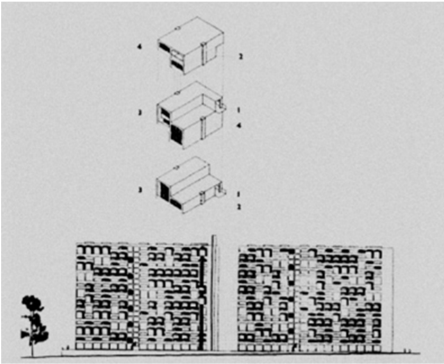


Plate 2. Ronchamp Chapel south door interior elevation, with a mural by Le Corbusier, 1954, (left); and Corbusian symbol for circadian rhythm at the entrance stone at the Unité Firminy-Vert, 1959-67, (right).



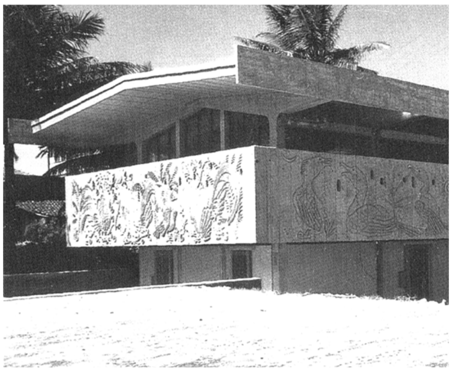


Plate 3. Architect Geoffrey Bawa's student design for housing in Holloway, London, influenced by a visit to Corbusier's Unité d'habitation in Marseille (left); and 'Tropical Modernism' at St. Thomas's Preparatory School in Colombo, 1957-64, with concrete relief motifs by artist Anil Jayasuriya (right); plates from Robson (2002).

The architect Geoffrey Bawa's fondness for integrating meaningful artwork into his projects is likely to have had root in his early appreciation of Corbusian motifs. The Architectural Association at the time of his registration was engaged in debate between the merits of Mies van der Rohe's cubic functionalism and Corbusier's emerging sculptural and symbolic plasticity. His interest with the latter was exemplified by a penultimate year group project concerning a housing scheme inspired by Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation*, which he had the privilege of visiting the previous summer (Robson, 2002). Later in practice he demonstrated this Corbusian influence with his design for the St. Thomas's preparatory school in Colombo (1957-64), including façades adorned with concrete relief motifs (Plate 3). The building soon gained recognition as an exemplar experiment in the style that was later known as the post-Corbusian influenced 'Tropical Modernism'. Bawa further experimented with layers of symbolic representation, with works of art integrated into the fabric of his buildings. Much like Corbusier, the layering was purposeful and meaningful representations of 'art', and not merely adornment for optical pleasure. The integration of such symbolic works would eventually become an essential and defining feature of his language of building.

Bawa's country estate at *Lunuganga* was his first endeavour in building and dwelling. Shortly after returning from Cambridge as a lawyer in 1948, he acquired the coastal estate in southwestern Sri Lanka and began to build his dwelling. The move marked a significant turning point in his life and affirmed his rootedness to his motherland. At the time he was not an audacious architect but a hesitant lawyer. After making a few initial intuitive gestures, he realised that to build his dwelling to his contentment he needed to properly learn the theories of building. He thus returned to London and graduated from the Architectural Association as an Architect in 1957, at the mature age of thirty-eight (Robson, 2002). His inspiration to become an architect was therefore ignited by an innate urge for place-making. Intuitively he realised the potential of *Lunuganga's* ability to enhance the very essence of his being, while the qualification of the learned 'designer' contributed the technical rigor necessary to realise this desire for a rooted dwelling (Gunawardena, 2009).

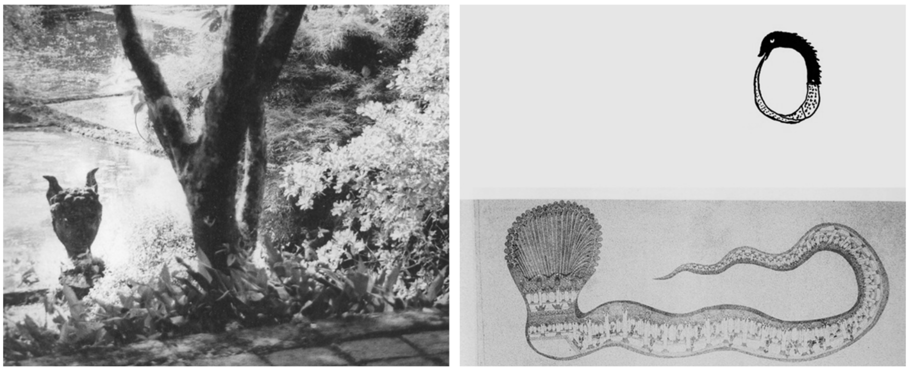


Plate 4. Horned Pan guarding the garden paddy fields (left); and tapestry of a mythical cobra in the house, with the symbol of Ouroboros[6] (right).

The initial experiments of the inexperienced architect reflected a Western modernity, understandably drawing from his then recent erudition. In the immediate post-colonial context, he also found plenty of patronage for this transplanted Modernism amongst the Westernised elites of the island's capital. Experimenting at the *Lunuganga* estate however soon revealed and amplified the limitations of such transplanted gestures in a tropical setting, which then commenced a critical reinterpretation phase, similarly at a time when 'Team X' was beginning to question Modernist validity in the West against a post-war milieu (Sansoni & Taylor, 1989). The situation at the country estate presented a potent challenge, as it already included a long history of diverse footprints to reconcile. He consequently had to reconsider Modernist ideas in response to the enhanced tropical reality of the site, as well as the island's cultural environment of the time. The estate and his eventual dwelling there challenged him to become a considerate place-maker, landscapist, master-builder, and most of all a 'local' architect (Bechhoefer, 2004; Gunawardena, 2009).

Bawa's conscientious efforts to source most of his inspiration, material, and operational systems from the surrounding context made him a 'regionalist' in the judgement of most critics. He however affirmed that, 'if you take local materials and the general feel of the place into account, the resultant building automatically becomes regional'; and in response to the architectural historian Kenneth Frampton's essay on *Critical Regionalism* (Frampton, 1983a; 1983b), he affirmed that he 'did not take regionalism as a creed' (Robson, 2002). He therefore never considered his approach to be the 'regionalising' of what he had learned from Western modernity, or as the renationalising of colonial traditions. Instead, he argued for the interpretive exchanges to exist simultaneously, as a reflection of the reciprocal realities of the given situation. Much as there are local realities explicitly evident, the universal equally resides in his works. In the practices of dwelling in these works the 'human being' in the higher sense would be at work, bridging cultures, geographies, and even time. A parallel to this may be drawn from Carl Jung's dwelling at his alchemical tower in Bollingen (Jung, 1963), with Bawa expressing the analogous claim to have 'lived [at *Lunuganga*] in many centuries simultaneously'. He thus regarded history as a repository of experiences and answers, and affirmed that he had 'always looked to the past for the help that previous answers can give' (*Times of Ceylon Annual*, 1968; in Bechhoefer (2004)). These discoveries were then communicated through the medium of the many historic artefacts and symbols he had collected and thoughtfully placed at the estate.

The pluralist perspective encouraged Bawa to develop an appreciation of many styles, traditions, and creative epochs. Amongst the artifacts placed at *Lunuganga* are thus works from creative spirits from many ages, both local and further afield. Although he always gave primacy towards reflecting local realities, he also indulged engagement with symbols from around the world. A fondness for Greek mythology seems to be significant. At both the country house and townhouse, symbols from Greek myth such as the Horned Pan[7] that guards the rice fields at the estate (Plate 4, p. 5), are thus sited as physical symbols (Bawa, et al., 2006). The Renaissance Classical tradition of both architecture and garden also seem to have had an influence on how these symbols were sited and their revealing sequenced. During the years he had spent in Veneto, he had frequented the banks of Lake Garda and experienced the many grand villas and sixteenth century gardens described as the 'third nature', including the splendour of nature yet ordered by a distinct creative force. The skilful implementation of the vista at the estate for example has founding in such tradition (Lazzaro, 1990), while the attention to the tempo of spatial transitions further justifies attribution to a Classical awareness. Beyond the Renaissance Garden, attribution could also be served to an awareness of the picturesque tradition of the eighteenth-century English Garden.

The delicate revealing of the manor house amidst seemingly natural surroundings for example, demonstrates a picturesque sequencing of events designed to be serendipitous to an encountering subject.

Artists of the time of the likes of Laki Senanayake, Donald Friend, and Lydia Duchini were central collaborators in the agenda to integrate mythological symbol into Bawa's buildings (Sansoni & Taylor, 1989). Senanayake was particularly fascinated by the symbolic merits of wildlife, while local truths were often depicted as engaging allegorical narratives (Plate 5, p. 8). Bawa was undoubtedly in favour of such associations and continued to encourage and integrate such works into evermore ambitious commissions. The Parliament House being a notable example that was adorned with such mythical symbolism. This was partly influenced by a sense of patriotism, but also by a deep-rooted appreciation of the psychic heritage of the islanders. The symbol of the lion for example has deep significance to the people, where the origin myth describes them to have been descended from the sacred union between a princess and a lion. He was indeed reverent of this symbolism and often included mythical lions as motifs (Plate 5), perhaps in efforts to connect the modern realities of a then young nation with the eternal truths of its ancestors.

The arrangements of the house and garden at *Lunuganga* reveal a deep awareness of psychic transcendence. The transcendent function is a psychic function that arises from the union of conscious and unconscious contents (Sharp, 1991). Studies in analytical psychology have shown the conscious and unconscious to seldom agree on their content and tendencies. This lack of parallelism is not just accidental or purposeless, but owing to the unconscious, behaves in a compensatory or complementary manner towards the conscious (Jung, 1975). The transcendent function plays a significant role in the process of individuation. At the estate there are various 'things', utilitarian, works of art, symbols, and other indefinable objects that attracts the attention of any engaging subject. Such things, regardless of their immediate signification, act as what Joseph Campbell describes as 'calls to adventure' (Campbell, 1993). They represent a meaningful presence that a psyche that is ripe for transcendence will seek to engage and answer. The mythical symbol therefore becomes a vital turning point in the individuation process of a psyche. To such a receptive individual it translates a meaning beyond it apparent physical form. An example of such a symbol is represented by a statue resembling a young

Hermes-Mercury[8] that is sited on the northern terrace. This to the ordinary eye is but an anachronistic figure of a Greco-Roman god placed in a context with little association to Greek mythology. To the receptive individual however, Hermes symbolises the gatekeeper of the 'threshold' between two distinct existential conditions, an enclosed domain of intimacy (the house), and the adventure of the outer domain (the garden beyond). The estate is dispersed with many such symbols that are sited, and in most instances oriented to achieve a distinct meaning to those who perceive their significance.

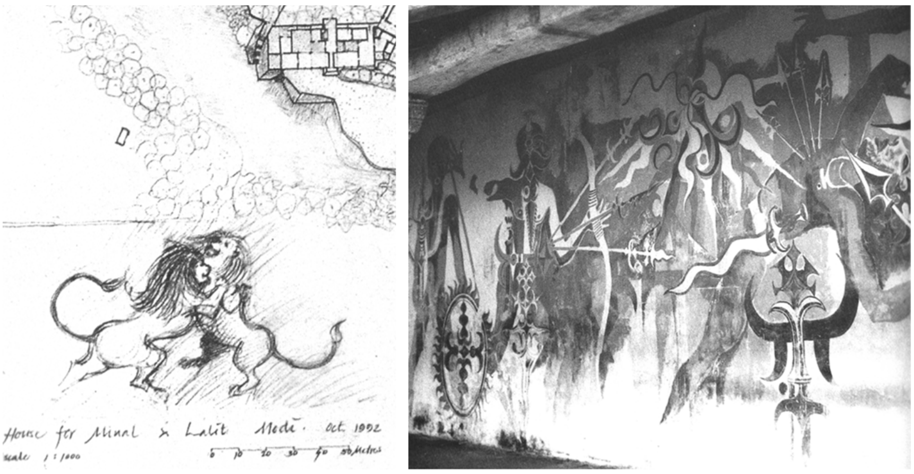


Plate 5. Bawa's sketch of two lions in battle on a plan (left); and a mural of warriors by Laki Senanayake in the veranda of the small house (right); plates from Bawa, et al. (2006).

Bawa's approach to ornamentation sought a deeper purpose than mere ocular appeal. A considered application was intended to serve the higher purpose of revealing the meaning in dwelling in such endeavours of building. By applying mythological symbols, he aimed to stimulate engagement that connected the subject to the past, debated the values of their time, and conveyed these discovered truths to future generations of dwellers. Such ornamentation added purpose to his expressions of building and dwelling, and presented it as worthy of a psychic legacy. Much of his oeuvre followed the precedent established at *Lunuganga* to convey meaning through symbols, and thus has the capacity of functioning without the need for any explicit explanation. It is significant to note that as a creative, he was always reluctant to use words to clarify his building endeavours (Sansoni & Taylor, 1989). He was indeed intensely mistrustful of the need for overt theorising, and questioned whether a building needs to ascribe 'static' meanings. Their true significance thus should be realised by the engaging subject and evolve with the maturity of their engagement. He thus offered little insight into the inspirations and remained constantly on guard against intrusions into his considerations (Robson, 2002). His appreciation and interpretation of art, literature, and mythology remain evident only in the experience of his works, which is perhaps how he intended them to serve the collective psyche of his people.

Bibliography

Bawa, G., Bon, C. & Sansoni, D., 2006. *Lunuganga.* Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions.

Bechhoefer, W., 2004. Beyond Regionalism. 11(01), pp. 09-10.

Campbell, J., 1993. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* London: Fontana Press.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica.* Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc..

Frampton, K., 1983a. Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance. In: H. Foster, ed. *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture.* Seattle: Bay Press, pp. 16-30.

Frampton, K., 1983b. Prospects for a Critical Regionalism. *Perspecta,* Volume 20, pp. 147-162.

Freud, S., 1978. Five lectures on Psychoanalysis, Leonardo Da Vinci and other works: 'Leonardo Da Vinci and the memory of his childhood'. In: *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* London: Hogarth Press, pp. 63-137.

Gunawardena, K. R., 2009. *Lunuganga, the instance of a dwelling: an analysis considering Heidegger and Jung [dissertation].* Bath: University of Bath.

Heidegger, M., 1975. Building Dwelling Thinking. In: *Poetry, Language, Thought.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers, pp. 145-61.

Heidegger, M., 1975. Poetically man dwells. In: *Poetry, Language, Thought.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Heidegger, M., 1975. *Poetry, Language, Thought.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Jaspers, K., 1962. *General Psychopathology.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jung, C. G., 1961. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1963. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections.* London: Collins and Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975a. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: Alchemical Studies.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975b. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: Psychology and Alchemy.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975c. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: Symbols of Transformation.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975d. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.* 2nd Edition ed. London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975e. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: The Sprit in Man, Art, and Literature.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975f. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G., 1975g. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung: The Symbolic Life. (Miscellaneous writings).*. London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G. ed., 1979. *Man and His Symbols.* London: Aldus Books.

Lazzaro, C., 1990. *The Italian Renaissance Garden.* New Haven: Tale University Press.

Le Corbusier, 1987. *The Decorative Art of Today.* London: Architectural Press.

Lévi-Strauss, C., 1980. *Myth and Meaning.* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul Ltd.

Loos, A., 1998. *Ornament and Crime: selected essays.* Riverside, Califonia: Ariadne Press.

Moacanin, R., 1986. *Jung's Psychology and Tibetan Buddhism.* London: Wisdom Publications.

Norberg-Schulz, C., 1980. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture.* London: Academy Editions.

Robson, D., 2002. *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works.* London: Thames & Hudson.

Sansoni, B. & Taylor, B. B., 1989. *Geoffrey Bawa, Architect in Sri Lanka.* London: Mimar Books.

Sharp, D., 1991. *Jung Lexicon, a Primer of Terms and Concepts.* Toronto: Inner City Books.

Stevens, A., 2001. *Jung: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Storr, A., 2001. *Freud: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Endnotes

[1] '**Archetypes**' are primordial structural elements of the human psyche. They are not so much inherited ideas, but inherited possibilities (Sharp, 1991, pp. 27-8), or inherited modes of functioning (Jung, 1975, p. 518, Para. 1228). They represent 'the archaic heritage of humanity' (Jung, 1975c, pp. 177-8, Para. 259).

[2] The '**psyche**' is the total of all psychological processes, both conscious and unconscious. It is said to be becoming, differentiating, and never anything final and never fully accomplished. It defies definition, and is but an infinite whole that resists any attempt to systemise it (Jaspers, 1962, p. 17). Jung believed that the search for a comprehensive theory for the nature of the psyche as an endeavour destined for failure (Sharp, 1991, p. 107).

[3] The '**unconscious**' is the totality of all psychic phenomena that lacks the quality of consciousness. 'It is the source of instinctual forces of the psyche and the forms and categories that regulate them, namely the Archetypes'. Jung believed the unconscious to be totally a psychological concept and not philosophical. He justified its existence as being solely derived from experience.

[4] '**Building**': in Heidegger's essay, *'Building-Dwelling-Thinking'* (Heidegger, 1975, pp. 145-61), he established a thesis that considered the three as one and the same; as a conjoined ontological endeavour. He considered building as a continual process that reinterprets our 'being' in relation to the world in the continuum of time. Building is therefore not a single act of validation of a place; it is continual as long as a 'sense of being' inhabits that place. To Heidegger this continual aspect of building entailed a sense of poetry, a deep human involvement with the world. Poetic building, he claimed is an ongoing activity rooted in individuals.

> *'Through what do we attain to a dwelling place? Through building. Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building.'*
>
> Martin Heidegger *(1975, p. 215).*

[5] '**Dwelling**': to dwell in the world is to experience in its immediacy one's relation to the world. This condition of 'relationality' to the world is what Martin Heidegger in his customary etymological spirals described as 'dwelling' (Heidegger, 1975, pp. 145-61). (See also: building).

[6] The '**ouroboros**' (tail-devouring serpent) is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon swallowing its own tail and forming a circle. It is symbolic of circularity (Jung, 1975b, p. 293). 'Time and again the alchemists reiterate that the opus proceeds from the one and leads back to the one, that it is a sort of circle like a dragon biting its own tail; 'Uroboros'. The symbol of the mythical cobra seems to have been significant to Bawa, as he used it as an introductory plate to his published description of the house and the upper garden at *Lunuganga* (Bawa, et al., 2006, pp. 60-1).

[7] *Lunuganga*, western edge of the upper garden looking down to the lower gardens with the Horned Pan's head guarding the paddy fields of the lower garden (Bawa, et al., 2006). Pan in Greek mythology was a fertility deity, representing flocks and shepherds of the mountainous wilderness, hunting, and rustic music. He supposedly wandered the hills of Arkadia playing his panpipes and chasing Nymphs. The Romans identified Pan with their own god Inuus, and sometimes also Faunus (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005, p. 101). The emotions that Pan instilled in human beings who accidently ventured into his domain was panic, fear, and a sudden fright. Pan was benign to all who paid him worship, yielding bounty for farmers, herders, and fisher folk who dedicated their first fruits to him. (Campbell, 1993, p. 81). His manifestation at *Lunuganga* is therefore a meaningful presence, guarding the rice harvest and ensuring a bountiful yield.

[8] Hermes-Mercury was known as the 'psycho-pomp' (soul-guide) and was entrusted with the task of guiding the dead to the underworld. Statues of Hermes-Mercury were often placed at crossroads symbolising the god's role as a mediator between two worlds. At *Lunuganga*, a statue resembling a young Hermes-Mercury is seen on the northern terrace symbolising the threshold between the north terrace (belonging to the domain of the house) and the garden beyond.