

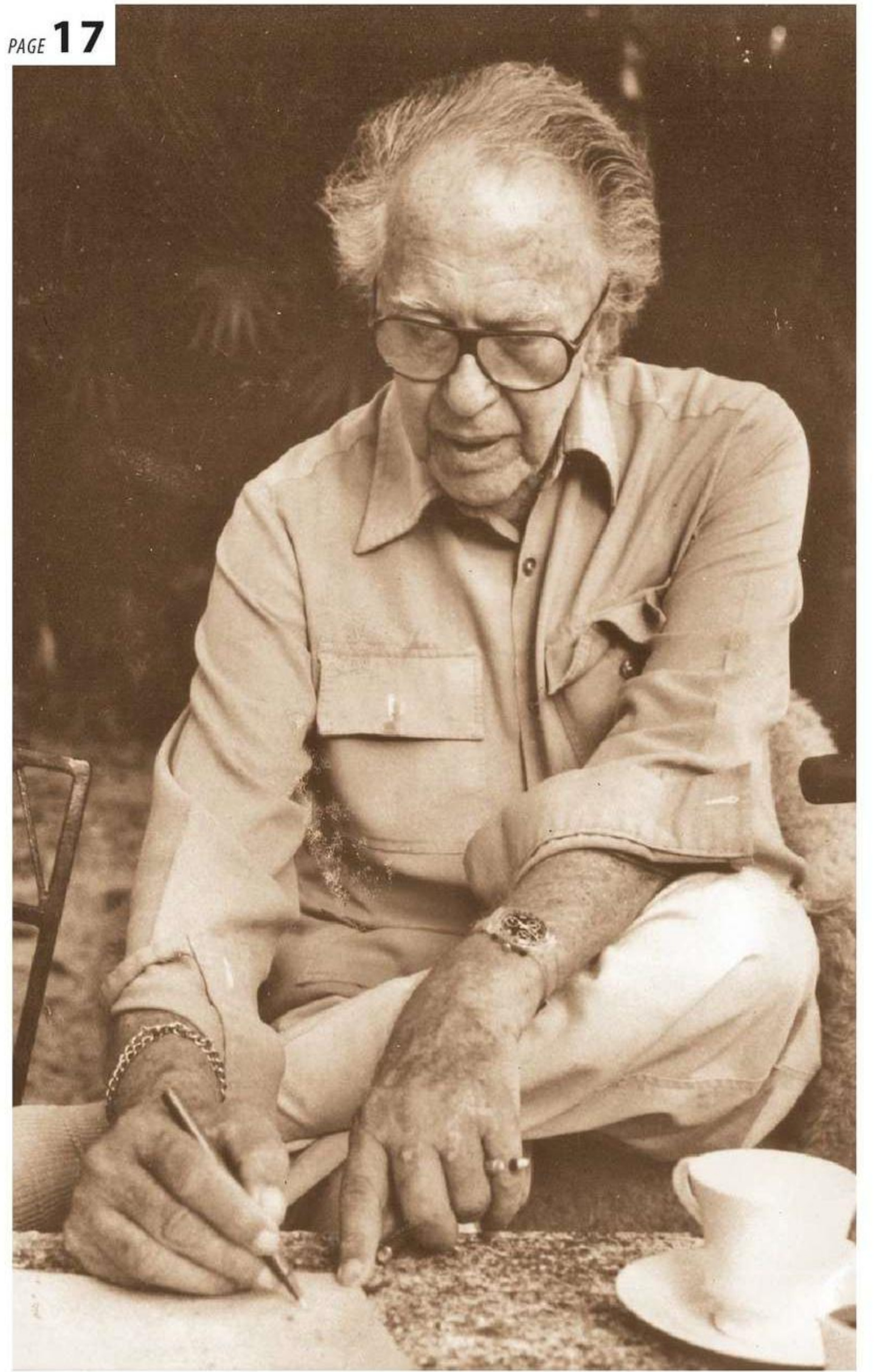


Photo courtesy: Lunuganga Trust / Banuka Vithanage

It's Essential to be There

To re-ignite the passions of town & country folk

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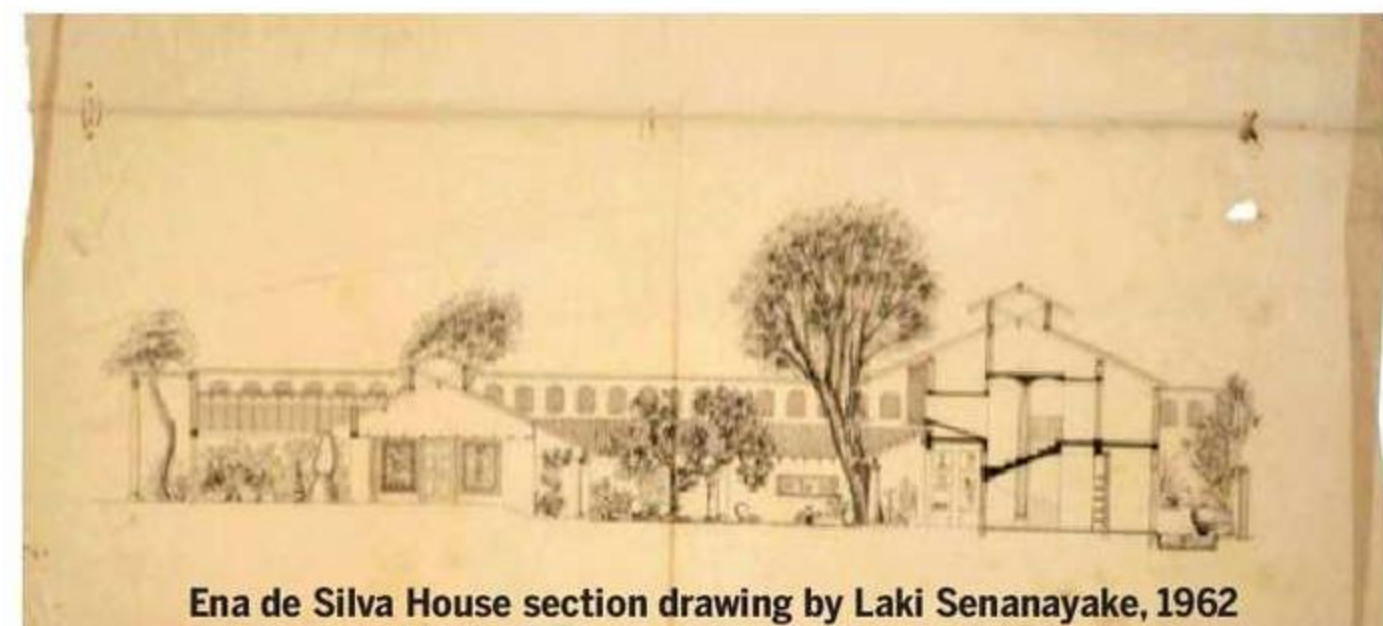
CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF GEOFFREY BAWA

The exhibition brings to the public eye rare documents from the architect's personal archive, including a trove of never-before-seen drawings, letters and photographs from his travels.



GAUTAMI REDDY

"In January 1948, I went home," Geoffrey Bawa wrote in a letter to his friend Jean Chamberlain, reflecting on the decision that changed the course of his entire life. After a decade in England where he studied law, he returned to Sri Lanka on the eve of its Independence from the British Empire. "I would go home and buy land near home," he elaborates in the letter that describes the origins of Lunuganga, Bawa's country home and garden, which became his lifelong muse and the birthplace of his distinctly 'tropical modernist' style of architecture.



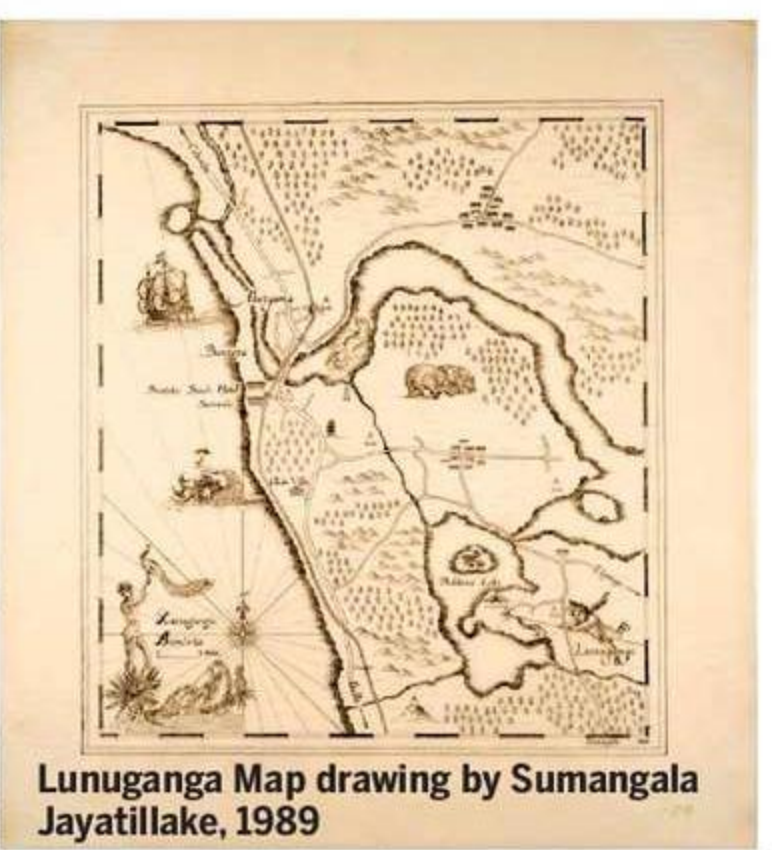
Ena de Silva House section drawing by Laki Senanayake, 1962



This letter, along with 120 personal documents including rare maps, sketches, photographs and drawings from Bawa's archive, are on view as part of 'Geoffrey Bawa: It's Essential to be There', the first-of-its-kind major exhibition to take place in Colombo on the legendary Sri Lankan architect at Park Street Mews. Brought together under the discerning eye of Shayari De Silva, curator and keeper of The Geoffrey Bawa Archive, the exhibition opens up new and lesser-known facets and stories from Bawa's extraordinary life.

From homes and hotels, to schools, colleges and Government buildings, every wall in the exhibition is a feast of drawings of sites designed by Bawa during the course of his long career between 1958 and 1998. Often sketched by fellow artists and architects including Laki Senanayake and Ismeth Raheem, the drawings offer a glimpse of Bawa's continuously creative mind and universe. Not only rich in mathematical and structural details, the drawings are also full of anecdotal references from everyday human life and surrounding nature.

"Getting the picture out and explaining to everyone is difficult. It is for this reason that in the drawings we make, trees and all the landscape elements are included. They are about the total picture," he said in a 1998 interview with his associate Channa Daswatte (whom we featured last week). From rocks and rivers to rains, every natural element from the



Lunuganga Map drawing by Sumangala Jayatillake, 1989

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Wherever he built, be it in Sri Lanka, India, Bali, Fiji or Mauritius, Bawa's work responded specifically and distinctly to the site, which includes the climatic conditions, its character and culture

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tropics finds representation in these studio drawings. One look and it is clear that for Bawa, architecture was not just about buildings, but also about presenting a lifestyle.

For Bawa, the "total picture" also involved living in harmony with the local environment. As De Silva explains, "Wherever he built, be it in Sri Lanka, India, Bali, Fiji or Mauritius, Bawa's work responded specifically and distinctly to the site, which includes the climatic conditions, its character and culture." Indeed, as exchanges with friends and clients reveal—including a 1989 letter to Suhrid Sarabhai of the prominent industrialists' family in Ahmedabad—the physical space and site was of utmost importance to Bawa. It was the centre and source of creative inspiration, what, in his words, "gave the most powerful push to the design along with the brief". It was essential to be there. And



Sand Dune Scheme, Yala, Sri Lanka, Elevation drawing by Nihal Amarasinghe

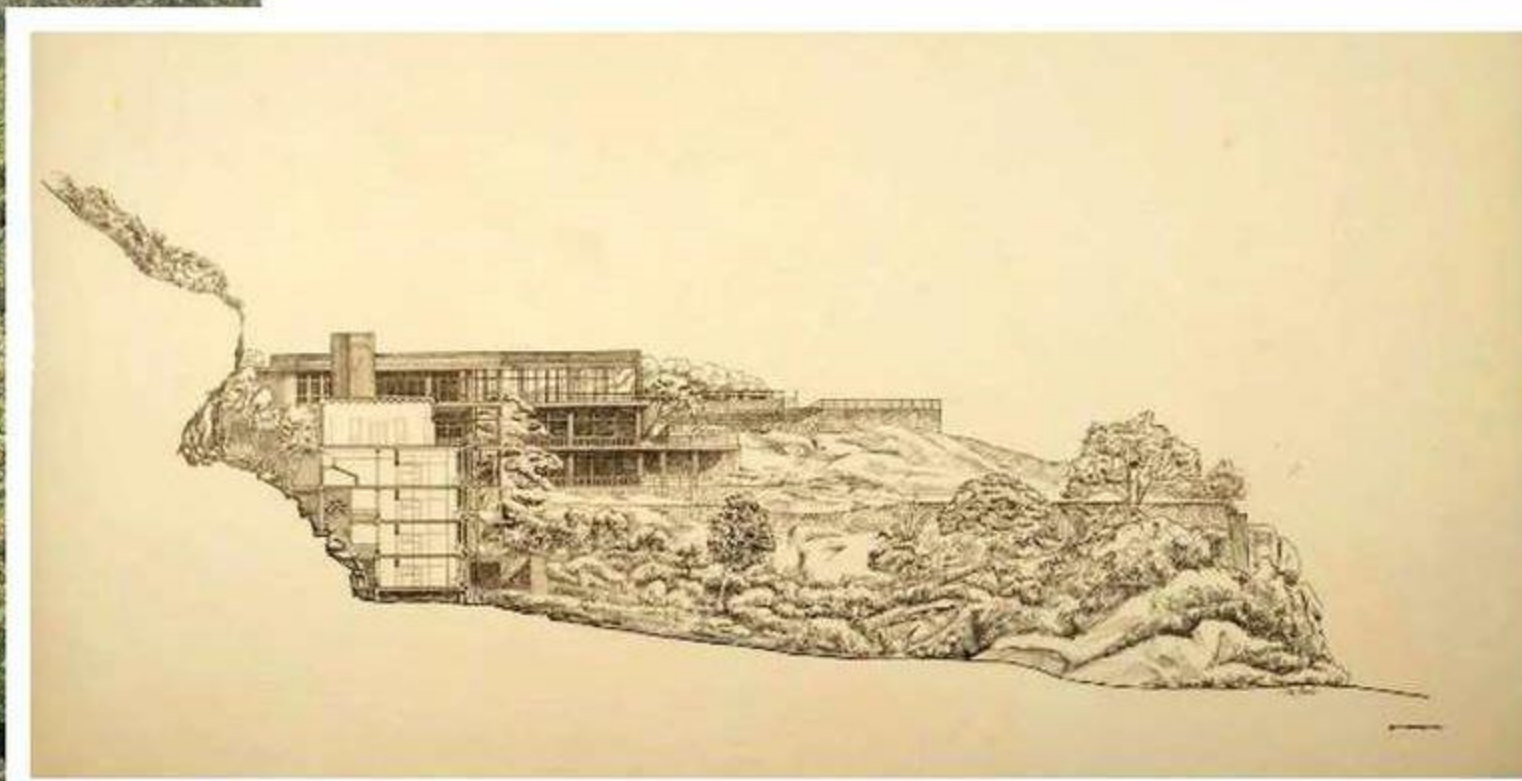
when he was, he knew exactly what to do.

The photographs on display—many of which were taken by Bawa on his Leica M7 camera during his travels to Europe as well as on project sites at home—document his raw reflections and observations. Some of his most iconic designs are brought

to life in these visuals, including the Colombo home of his friend and Batik maker Ena De Silva, one of Bawa's groundbreaking designs known for its inventive inclusion of a garden at its centre; the grand Polontalawa Estate Bungalow in the dry zone of Nikaweratiya where existing boulders were integrated into the building's construction, the large and airy St. Bridget's Montessori in Colombo, which resembles a sheltered tree top, and his design for the Ceylon Pavilion at Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan, which fused the country's fast-evolving modern identity with the indigenous art and architecture from its past.

"To me, it is impossible to pinpoint a 'Bawa Style,'" says De Silva about the famous architect. True to that belief, the exhibition has been curated in the three languages—Tamil, Sinhalese and English—paying homage to Bawa's multi-layered practice that has been loved and admired by generations of architects in Sri Lanka and everywhere overseas.

(Architectural Digest)



Kandalama Hotel, Dambulla, Sri Lanka, Section drawing by Tim Beecher, c. 1996