The dignity of the everyday

By coincidence I lived for a couple of years in a small flat in Matti Välikangas’s Olympic Village in Helsinki (1939–40) to which Hildi Hawkins referred in Insight: ‘Home, sweet home’ (arq 7/1, pp 94–96). I too reflected my time in such environments onto my home here: the hyper-efficient planning, daylighting, wet-floor bathrooms, double-rebated doors with lift-off hinges etc. Along with a quality that I also sense in some design of the same period here: seemingly quite ordinary buildings imbued with the hopes of an embryonic welfare state and the care of the architects and builders who built them.

It is clearly easy to be nostalgic about all this. But as Kirsi Saarikangas’ book Transformations of the Dwelling, Gender and the Aesthetics of Cleanliness in Modern Architecture shows, the context of Finnish design in this period was very concrete and self-conscious. As Hildi Hawkins writes, design was rooted in the development of the ‘Finnish way of life’, itself closely linked to the ‘Finnish nationalist project’. Progressively conformist, this project had/has a darker side that makes the benign images shown in the article, in which everything and everyone seems to know their place, exude a certain disquiet as well as a sense of modest order. But while accepting that such concepts of ‘normal life’ – from employment to sexuality – are old hat, it still leaves us, as architects, the question of the skill with which the spaces and objects were designed at that time. And that skill, which Hawkins observes as a remarkable aestheticizing of everyday life, ‘the dignity of the everyday’ as she quotes Saarikangas, is remarkable.

But, from our ironic and self-conscious era, it seems to be difficult to get at how this quality was actually achieved. It has been much easier to adopt that aesthetic of sparse, clean lines and discreet details as a brand symbolizing whatever qualities we wish on to it: for instance a mystical attitude to nature, a national feeling, a correct taste etc. More worryingly still, this attitude regards practitioners as passive mirrors of society rather than active makers of the environment, as though architects and architectural critics were uninterested in what architects actually do – now I am being ironic.

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Seen from this viewpoint, Alvar Aalto’s three-legged stool becomes merely iconic, not a beautifully judged response in which a local resource is reconsidered through the assimilation of a global influence: its technique and material matched so that the leg is laminated only at the knee where it is needed. Similarly the way a mug from Kaj Franck’s Kulta/Teema series of crockery balances perfectly in the hand is overlooked and the precise qualities of the tints and the sensual curves of the original Aino Marsio-Aalto’s Bölgeblick glassware are forgotten in its denuded revival [see illustration].

Curating the Alvar Aalto centenary exhibition Process & Culture – an exposition of a single building, the House of Culture (Kulttuuritalo) – at the RIBA Heinz Gallery in 1998 brought all this home. As Charlie MacKeith and I pored through the various archives and continually revisited the building, what came across more and more was a design that was absolutely direct in its relationship to its contexts and programme, both in responding to them and in extending and accentuating them. (By the way, Peter Blundell Jones’ remarks about the acoustics in his article – arq 7/1, p 80 – are way off the mark, they are sparkling for both speech and music.)
I think what makes the House of Culture and so many of the dwellings that Hildi Hawkins describes so special is the straightforwardness with which they are designed. The spaces and objects have an active empathy with their inhabitants and place that comes from making the nuances of use and sitting fundamental parts of the design process. The harmonies of the design then come from a working process of suggestion, correction and refinement; drawing and redrawing. It is this architectural process that seems to me the most vital thing to garner from what Hildi Hawkins calls this high period of Finnish architecture and design. And even if Finland is by no means in such a period at the moment, I think a major reason it is still producing a fair amount of considered, good quality work is because architects there are still more or less able to work in this way. That they can continue to do so is due to their ability as a profession to set out and articulate that this straightforward designing is what architects do. In comparison, nowadays architects in Britain are continually redefined by an organization in which architects are in the minority at board level – a quite extraordinary situation. In willing the Architects Registration Board (ARB) into being after the demise of Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom (ARCUK), British architects missed an opportunity to define themselves and instead architects missed an opportunity to create a rod for their back. And all so we can have protection of title, protection from what – ourselves?

It seems to me the most vital thing that this straightforward designing is what architects do. In comparison, nowadays architects in Britain are continually redefined by an organization in which architects are in the minority at board level – a quite extraordinary situation. In willing the Architects Registration Board (ARB) into being after the demise of Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom (ARCUK), British architects missed an opportunity to define themselves and instead architects missed an opportunity to create a rod for their back. And all so we can have protection of title, protection from what – ourselves?

In Finland (as in many countries) everybody can call themselves an architect, and far from damaging architects it appears to me to strengthen them. Like the RIBA, SAFA, the Finnish Association of Architects, is no more than a private club (in Finnish it is simply Architektojen Yhdistys, a registered society, just like any local amateur football team or choir). But it carries far more clout than the RIBA which is emasculated by registration, and which with the advent of a bullish ARB and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) seems to have less of a purpose. SAFA has this clout because it is unincumbent, like the RIBA which is emasculated by registration, and which with the advent of a bullish ARB and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) seems to have less of a purpose. 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Bawa's work for the Catholic Church included the Yathapath Endara Farm Orphanage, Hanwell, 1965. (Photograph: Christoph Bon)
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letters


Other grouped housing scheme. Row houses for P. C. de Saram, Colombo, 1970: Geoffrey Bawa. (Photograph: Harry Sowden)


Some degree experimental and all of them worthy of study. These included the de Saram row houses in Colombo (1970) [see illustration], the Albert Teo row houses in Singapore (1989), and staff housing schemes for the Steel Corporation at Oruwela (1966) [see illustration], for the Madurai Mills in South India (1975), for the Fertiliser Corporation at Sapugaskanda (1976) and for the Ministry of Irrigation in Colombo (1978). The Oruwela project deployed small courtyard houses in rows. It was particularly successful and could have served as a potent prototype for medium density housing in Colombo. A model of this will be included in our forthcoming Bawa retrospective exhibition that will open in Frankfurt in 2004.

More significantly, critics have ignored the fact that Bawa’s designs for individual houses, such as those for Ena de Silva (1960), Chris Raffel (1962) or the Martenstyns (1977), were often both radical and innovative and served as important prototypes for new ways of living in a tropical city. They were widely imitated and had a very significant impact on the dwelling patterns of a whole generation of urban Sri Lankans. Later, as has been demonstrated by Robert Powell (1996, 1998), their influence spread throughout Tropical Asia. The Ena de Silva House in particular, with its internal courtyards and open living spaces, offered a revolutionary blueprint for a house on a small site. Bawa went on to flout prevailing building regulations, building on ever smaller sites, and in 1966 designed a house for Pieter Keuneman, the future Minister of Housing, on six perches (150 sq m). The fact that today a majority of new houses in Colombo are built on small plots around internal courtyards with deep verandahs is very largely due to his work during the 1960s.

In part, Bawa was a victim of his own spin. Early articles which appeared in The Architectural Review (Richards, Brawne) offered a balanced account of his work: Richards’ ‘Seven new buildings in Ceylon’ comprised, in addition to two houses, a chapel, an office, an industrial estate and two schools. It was the best-selling White Book of 1986 (Taylor), very much choreographed by Bawa himself, which emphasized the picturesque and vernacular qualities of his buildings and gave pride of place to hotels and private houses, omitting such utilitarian projects as the Mahaweli Tower or the Pallakelle Industrial Estate.

My second response is to ask why a Sri Lankan architect or indeed a Mexican architect, should have to defend himself against such criticisms in the first place. Why must we burden every ‘Third World’ architect with the responsibility for solving complex problems of mass housing and urbanization in their native countries? It’s not a demand we would make of an architect of the ‘First World’.

The twentieth century was littered with examples of bad public housing and town planning perpetrated by celebrated architects who dabbled disastrously in fields where they lacked the necessary skills or humility. In Sri Lanka, when Prime Minister Premadasa embarked on his celebrated ‘Hundred Thousand Houses Programme’ at the end of the 1970s, he called on the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects to help him and channelled a number of large projects, including three new townships, through the Institute to its members. The results, as Premadasa soon discovered, were far from impressive, and the most successful large-scale contractor-built housing projects from that period were designed in the public sector by the State Engineering Corporation under the direction of Turner Wickremasinghe, a former Bawa collaborator.

I discussed these questions with Bawa in 1980 when I was working in Sri Lanka’s National Housing Development Authority and was managing a large self-help housing programme. At that time he was heavily involved with the building of the Kotte Parliament and the Ruhunu University Campus, but he was fascinated by what I was doing and found the time to accompany me on a number of my site visits. He enjoyed talking to people about how they had planned their own homes and discussing with them the materials they were using. However, with that typical self-effacement to which Murphy refers, and which had persuaded him some thirty years earlier to abandon a legal career because he feared the human consequences of his incompetence, he told me that he would be quite incapable of designing a large low-cost housing scheme and that if he were to take on such a project would do far more harm than good.

The fact that Bawa laid absolutely no claims to be a urban planner or a designer of mass housing does not devalue his very real achievements in other spheres or diminish the significance of his designs for the community in which he lived and worked. Bawa was a man of action rather than words and remained wary of...
The acoustic response but adds a sculptural dimension to the space. The beauty of this new approach is that it enables the combination of closely defined acoustical performance with the desired architectural form. This is not just a 'happy accident' as occurred between Scharoun and Cremer, but an approach where the architect's and acoustician's demands can both be accommodated with great precision.

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Theorizing, though his approach to his work was always cerebral, reflective and self-critical. He saw himself as a master builder, a landscapist, a place-maker and as an architect of Sri Lanka.

David Robson
Brighton, England

David Robson teaches at the University of Brighton. His book, Geoffrey Bawa: the Complete Works, is published by Thames and Hudson, price £45 (hb)

References

Reshaping acoustics
Peter Blundell Jones’ and Jian Kang’s article ‘Acoustic form in the Modern Movement’ (arq 7/1, pp 75–85) eloquently describes how functional form may sometimes have been driven by acoustical requirements – the clearest example is perhaps the fruitful collaboration between Scharoun, the architect, and Cremer, the acoustician, in the design of the Berlin Philharmonie.

I would like to add to this thesis by describing a development in the late twentieth century that is already influencing acoustic form and is likely to become widely used in the future. This is based on a computational technique (Boundary Element Analysis) which enables a surface to be generated which can reflect incident sound in any pattern that is required. For example, if a wall in a room is concave and therefore likely to focus sound in an unhelpful way for the acoustics, it can be subjected to minor re-shaping by the Boundary Element Method to neutralize the focusing and provide uniformly diffuse reflected sound.

This technique has already been tried by the architects Patel Taylor in collaboration with Arup Acoustics in the design of a small recital hall for the Benslow Music Trust where Patel Taylor proposed a strong circular element in the plan shape of the hall [see illustration]. Such circular geometry, of course, focuses sound and if the musicians are near a focus they will hear differences in loudness which will make playing in good ensemble difficult. Similar undesirable variations in loudness will occur for the audience. However, using the Boundary Element Method, it is possible to generate a surface geometry that will provide the exact degree of sound diffusion required to cancel the strong focusing. What is even more attractive is that a shape motif can be chosen by the designers, eg a continuous wave, a stepped surface or some other geometrical form, and this shape is optimized, or morphed, by the mathematical process to give the precise diffusing surface.

In the case of the Patel Taylor design for the Benslow recital hall, they chose a continuous wave of varying amplitude and the optimized version of this resulted in an undulating wooden screen that not only provides the appropriate acoustic response but adds a sculptural dimension to the space. The beauty of this new approach is that it enables the combination of closely defined acoustical performance with the desired architectural form. This is not just a ‘happy accident’ as occurred between Scharoun and Cremer, but an approach where the architect’s and acoustician’s demands can both be accommodated with great precision.

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