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Ulrich Plesner: Playboy Architect of the Eastern world

6 June 2013 | By Timothy Brittain-Catlin



Plesner's new autobiography provides scintillating holiday reading for architects

Memoirs by architects in which they describe what happened to them in their professional lives, as opposed to how they see themselves in terms of contemporary architectural criticism, are surprisingly rare. If there were more, an entire alternative architectural history could be written. For nearly 200 years a sort of dictatorship of opinions has prevailed in which a small number of people, using what is really little more than the terminology

invented by the early Gothic Revival (buildings are 'good', 'bad', 'immoral', 'progressive', 'reactionary', and so on) decide which of a large number of buildings are worth talking about. And with few exceptions – most famously Brian Appleyard's Richard Rogers of 1986 – biographies and autobiographies of architects have become simply adjuncts to the tendentious promotion machinery of the critics.

The AR may have been part of the dictatorship but nevertheless the fact that its editors and contributors generally were or had been architects has meant that they were able to appreciate the work of creative people who designed outside definable categories. Thus they saw in the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa a remarkable fusion of East and West, beginning with a lengthy article on his work in 1966 and continuing beyond his death in 2003 with news reports and exhibition reviews. Stories about Bawa recall a party-loving individual who paid another student to complete his final-year project at the AA while he swanned about Rome in his Rolls-Royce. How then did he manage to pull off a large number of buildings – 50 projects on the go at any one time, according to this book – some of which were not only complex, but were also somewhere considerably in the vanguard of sustainable, climatically sensitive architecture?



The ambitious and innovative Polontolawa House of 1964 where huge rocks burst from the living room floor.

The answer was Ulrik Plesner – the Danish architect who worked so closely with Bawa for nine years from 1958 that many assumed he was his boyfriend (he was not: Plesner, working his way through the most attractive ladies of Sri Lanka, observes here that 'as a student in Copenhagen, I used to say that the only interesting men were either homosexuals or Jews and that my tragedy was that I was neither'). The nephew of a major Danish National-Romantic architect with the same name, Plesner was born in Florence in 1930. Before the war he holidayed at his mother's early 19th-century family estate in Stirlingshire; he then lived in Copenhagen under occupation, in the same street as Hitler's commandant for Denmark. He developed a passion – completely unexplained in this unselfconscious book – for the Far East and in 1956, after graduating from the Royal Danish Academy, won third prize in a competition to design a memorial for the Buddha, with a scheme that bore a remarkable resemblance to what John McAslan has done at King's Cross Station.



Anti-Colonialist Architecture: "I understood that Sri Lanka has a wonderful and functional architectural tradition that goes back to the 14th century," says Plesner.

As in some improbable dream of an ambitious young architect, the beautiful pioneer Sri Lankan Modernist Minnette de Silva then not only sends for handsome young Ulrik but also makes love to him in his first night at her house, simultaneously saving him from being swept away in a landslide. But she is chaotic, charmless and broke.

Before long Plesner met Bawa ('One immediately sensed that his life was a splendid theatre with him at the centre of a beautiful stage, where it was everyone else who came and went') who invited him to a party. There it started. Bawa claimed to have learned nothing at the AA – hardly surprisingly, if he was in Rome most of the time – and Plesner's job was to explain to him how to make real buildings from his ideas. So what this book is about is the intense practical experience of working in a small country, with its tiny social circles, and the relatively speedy process by which new concepts could be realised, or abandoned following some political cataclysm. Fine old cars, parties, artists, drinks, lovers. Real problems with planning and building. Which is sexier?



The beautiful Sri Lankan modernist pioneer Minnette de Silva

There are many gorgeous monochrome photographs, drawings and plans in this book, mostly of Plesner and Bawa's houses of colonnades, courtyards and vistas; especially impressive is the ambitious and innovative Polontolawa House of 1964 where huge rocks burst from the living room floor. Plesner left Bawa three years later after they fell out over professional attribution; his subsequent career saw him as a major architect in Israel and, now, the patriarch of an architectural practice run by his daughters which continues the Plesnerian, Bawan tradition. Not many books provide good holiday reading for architects. This is one of them.

In Situ: an architectural memoir from Sri Lanka, Ulrik Plesner, Aristo, Copenhagen, 300 DKK

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