

## Feature/ News

# Ulrik Plesner in Sri Lanka: a review of *In Situ*

BY RAJIV WANASUNDERA

In January 1958 a young Danish man in his twenties gets off a ship in Colombo. He is an architect; he is devastatingly handsome and has a wry sense of humour. He lives in Sri Lanka for almost a decade, working in Kandy, then Colombo, befriending fascinating people, absorbing the culture and heritage of the island and traveling its length and breadth. In 1967 he abruptly returns to Europe, leaving behind a trail of broken hearts, and more importantly, a number of ground breaking modern buildings that continue to influence and inspire to this day. He returns to Sri Lanka at the age of fifty, for another seven years. His time on the island leaves an indelible impression on him, and he considers these years as being the happiest of his life.

Ulrik Plesner, now aged 82 and living in Israel, has published a memoir titled *In Situ*. It is an eminently readable account of his years in Sri Lanka. It details his collaboration with Minnette de Silva and Geoffrey Bawa, his friendships with Ena de Silva, Barbara Sansoni and Laki Senanayake, and of the remarkable contribution he made to Sri Lankan architecture. The book is a narrative of his time on the island, interspersed with family history, sketches, newspaper clippings, architectural drawings and photographs. There are chapters on Minnette and Geoffrey, Ena and Barbara; others on his work and teaching and a final section covering his second act in Sri Lanka as Director of the Mahaweli Architecture Unit.

The language in the early chapters is so evocative and elegant that it is hard to resist being seduced by the imagery. Plesner describes his initial years in Sri Lanka as a "state of grace," and that comes through strongly in the writing as well. Describing one of Minnette's early houses, he writes: "it was like a poem in breeze and air surrounded by a garden of giant leaves." Metaphors like this abound in the book, giving it the feel of a magical realist novel. However, the

account of the 1980s is much more cut and dried. There are descriptions of meetings with senior politicians and the logistical challenges involved in managing a fast-paced development project. Despite this, some details would not be out of place in a spy thriller – accounts of smuggling Israeli "agricultural experts" into the country by breaching the fence at Katunayake or being asked for advice by President Jayewardene on which type of helicopter gunship to purchase for the air force! In the end, *In Situ* feels like two separate texts; the early chapters written by someone idealistic, poetic and passionate and the later section by a middle-aged bureaucrat.

Plesner's contribution to modern Sri Lankan architecture cannot be disputed. He worked alongside two of the most influential Sri Lankan architects of the 20th century. His collaboration with Geoffrey Bawa produced many remarkable buildings which served as a springboard to Bawa's future success and world-wide acclaim. He joined Barbara Sansoni in her endeavor to document the historic vernacular building tradition of Sri Lanka and enlisted like-minded students to join the effort by sharing his knowledge of measuring existing buildings. He helped mould a generation of young Sri Lankan architects by teaching at the newly established architecture school in Katubedde. He was a catalyst who ignited the creative spark in many people. Donald Friend in his diaries remarks: "he [Ulrik] believes one can do anything, so one does."

The projects Plesner worked on in the 1960s include some of the most significant buildings built in post-independence Sri Lanka. They include the Sansoni Annex, Bandarawela Chapel and the house at Polontalawa. Plesner takes great care to present the work done by Bawa and himself during this period as the product of "an exclusive and seamless partnership." He writes that "there was absolute understanding about where we were going and what we were trying to achieve and what was the



purpose of it all, and we urged each other on like two people doing a beautiful puzzle together." According to Plesner, it was his technical proficiency and knowledge of construction that shaped Bawa's raw talent. It allowed Bawa to move beyond being a dilettante with a passion for gardening and become a great architect. There is no doubt their collaboration was fruitful and it laid the groundwork for Geoffrey Bawa's long and productive career. However, Plesner's role as an equal partner in Bawa's office is a contentious one and continues to be debated by scholars and Bawa's later associates. Plesner does not expand on what he learned from Bawa, other than to say that each person had strengths and weaknesses that complemented the other, and that "what one lacked, the other had, as if we had emptied the contents of our pockets on the table and found that together we had a complete set of tools."

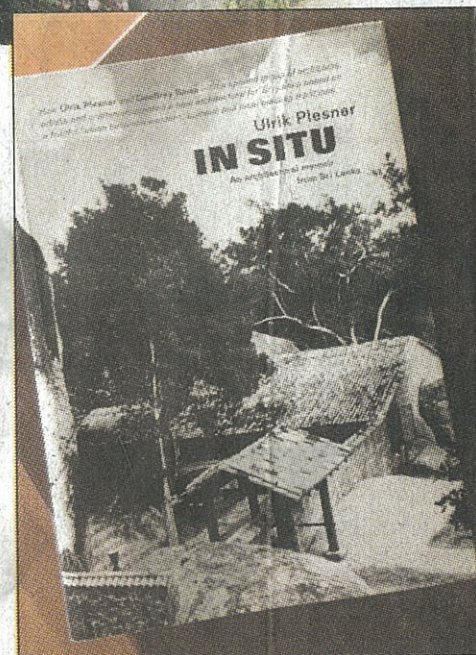
Plesner left Sri Lanka in 1967. The moribund economy, a perception that Bawa was not willing to share credit for their joint work and his marriage to a

have been.

It is perhaps unfortunate, that in attempting to set the record straight to his satisfaction, there is an element of score settling that creeps into Plesner's memoir. He makes the hyperbolic claim "that the only architecture school Geoffrey ever had was the one I put him through." He can be occasionally callous. His chapter on Minnette ends with him casually stating that she "died many years later, I was told, in the charity wing of the Kandy hospital." It seems like a rather off hand way to talk of the woman who invited him to Sri Lanka, who was a colleague and lover, who he credits with ending his "delayed childhood."

Nonetheless, Plesner is to be commended for publishing this remarkable work of personal history. To read the text is to get an intimate – though controlled – glimpse into a significant period in Plesner's life. He is candid, always entertaining and willing to admit to some of his own faults and weaknesses. There are minor errors in the text which could have been easily corrected by a vigilant editor, such as referring to the film *Elephant Walk* as "Elephant Path" and the misspelling of several first and last names. He is charming and seductive at most times, occasionally selfish and infuriating, and sometimes contradictory. Plesner is a self-proclaimed socialist who disdains a client's feudal demeanour, yet he enjoys swanning around the country in Bawa's Rolls Royce. Despite these small flaws, *In Situ* is an important contribution to architectural scholarship in Sri Lanka. It is a wonderfully entertaining and beautifully written account of a time when a truly modern Sri Lankan architectural identity came into being.

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young Israeli woman, Tamar Liebes, all contributed to his decision to move on. One wonders what may have come to pass if he had remained. There is an undercurrent of sadness that is present in the book; at the lost opportunities, unrealized potential and what could