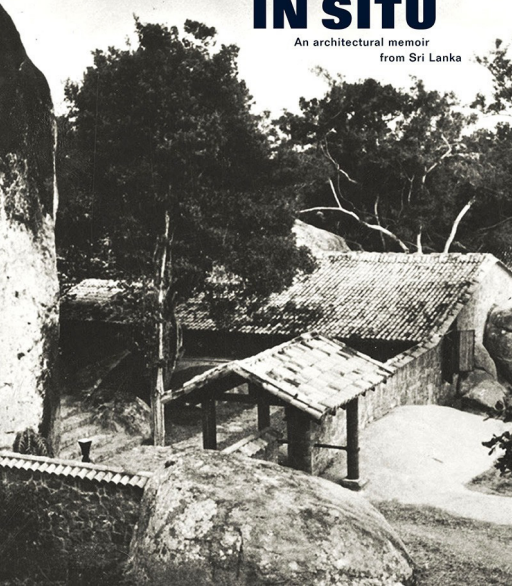


How Ulrik Plesner and Geoffrey Bawa with a spirited group of architects, artists and craftsmen created a new architecture for Sri Lanka based on a fruitful fusion between western, colonial and local building traditions.

Ulrik Plesner **IN SITU**

An architectural memoir
from Sri Lanka



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POLONTOLAWA

Polontolawa was a thousand acres of scrub jungle with beautiful outcrops of giant rounded rosy coloured rocks and a slowly meandering river, the Deduru Oya. It belonged to Bauris, an old Swiss company who was turning the jungle into a coconut plantation. To get there, one drove north along the coast towards Puttalam, and then inland on a narrow road, and finally by paths and stream beds for the last few miles.

The estate was being cleared and planted by Peter, a young Swiss manager. He lived in a comfortable and pleasant hut with walls made of wattle and daub (dried mud reinforced by woven branches), and a roof of palm leaf thatch, the same as the houses of the jungle villagers who worked on the estate. The villagers built these houses in a few days entirely with materials from the place, and they are delightfully cool and pleasant and sometimes also beautiful. But since mud walls melt like warm chocolate when they get wet, the bathroom and the overhead water tank were built outside of ugly cement blocks, and since snakes love to live in the thatched roof, the big four-poster bed had its own roof. And since at any time a palm thatch roof can burn in a flash, Bauris wanted a safe, proper house, of which E, R & B had drawers full.

To find the best location, Peter and I wandered all over the estate on foot, in a jeep and on elephant back. We chose an area of huge, rounded, orange-coloured rocks, with prehistoric cleavage marks and a powerful feeling of past human presence. It must have been with the same innocent pleasure and conviction that Buddhist monks placed their temple on top of a rock, or that Crusaders in a majestically empty landscape chose a site for their castle, or British colonial administrators like Leonard Woolf a hundred years ago chose to place a rest house on the most beautiful lake site. Every

landscape has only one such site. For those who come first there are no boundaries, no people, no consideration for others. And for those who come after, it is never the same.

It was quite out of the question to deliver a standard bungalow for such a blessed place, it would have been like spitting in the face of creation. In order to think realistically, the first step is always to get a site survey plan. But it would have been impossible for an ordinary surveyor to do a survey plan of this site because the rocks were leaning in and over, creating hollow spaces at different levels. And the prickly scrub was so dense; the surveyor would not have been able to pass his tapes through without the usual surveyors' solution of clearing the site of everything, including some of the beautiful jungle trees.

Instead, I spent the next day sketching a map, drawing the rocks to a scale of 1/16th of an inch to 1 foot in approximately the right sizes and relationship to each other and marking the locations of the best looking trees, though this entailed some difficult acrobatics because of the thorny primal undergrowth. Afterwards I measured the important distances as exactly as I could by walking paces that were three foot long each. As the prickly scrub prevented measuring from object to object, I walked a parallel course wherever possible, counting my paces. Smaller measures, like a cleft between rocks, I could measure foot by foot, having a one-foot foot. The result was curiously accurate.

Back in Colombo, Bours' general manager, Thilo Hofman, described what they wanted, and said that apart from drainage and electricity, the house would be built by the same jungle villagers who tended the coconut palms. They envisaged a variation of the building type called an "estate bungalow." Every tea, rubber and

coconut plantation in Ceylon had them. They were large, spread-out houses with dark rooms and high ceilings. In front, there was a long wide veranda with low eaves and at the back the kitchen and servants, quarters. They were generally chaotic variations on standard plans, often cheaply finished with metal sheet roofs. They were full of servants polishing floors and silver, cooking and gardening and sweeping, and changing curtains and linen all the time. Everything shone, and the lawns outside were immaculate. They were cocoons of comfort that were wonderful to visit. But their days were waning. The planters were going home to England, the rubber and coconut planters were becoming poor because of the world market, and in no time these houses were being taken over by nature and looked like rambling village houses. Their glory lay in the ceaseless maintenance.

Thilo wanted something less colonial. Something more suited to a middle-class Ceylonese manager's family. And a beautiful place for himself to stay on his frequent jungle trips. I sketched the house plan as four interconnected buildings strewn among the rocks. Sitting on rocks and looking at rocks. Arriving from afar you would see a roofed lichgate in a long low wall winding at the foot of the tall rocks and ending in a tall stone water tower. The stonewall went from rock to rock enclosing a one-acre natural rock garden, inside of which the house stood shaded by gnarled old trees. The centre of the house was the living room, which was open on all four sides, and wherever you looked you saw garden and rocks and the wall at the end of the view. The bedrooms were placed together in a small cluster with trellis windows and a locked entrance to give an illusion of safety at night.

With this sketch we went with Thilo to Polontolawa for a long weekend, and we spent three wonderful days setting out the house

on the site, sculpting it among the rocks, and bringing to life all the little pleasures like how you enter between two rocks, how you make the master bed of a prehistoric flat split rock covered with a foam mattress, and how you build the big roof. It turned out that the three big rocks on which the central concrete roof beam was supposed to rest were not aligned, as they seemed to the naked eye. The middle rock was out of line and the arched beam couldn't be supported in the centre. We jiggled in the jeep along deep tracks to fetch some engineers building a power line nearby. Geoffrey convinced them to drill five 1-inch holes into the side of the centre rock, which they thought was completely irresponsible, but till today the arch rises elegantly and seemingly unsupported from the vertical side of the rock.

Five jungle villagers carrying white strings and long white bamboo rods, ran around stretching lines for wall locations, corners, roof lines and ridges, and moved them, and moved them again, and raised and lowered them, whilst we pleaded and cajoled and suffered the agony and pleasure of creation. God must have had a great time in his seven days on site. On the last evening there stood among the rocks and on the background of the jungle trees, a full-size magic, transparent, ghost building, drawn in white lines in the air. It stood for over a year, more tattered as time went by, and every two weeks I, sometimes together with Geoffrey, visited the site and told the foreman what to build before the next visit, a foundation from here to there, these pillars, those windows. Thus the house grew without drawings or plans or budget.

Peter had a leopard kitten the size of a small dog, which terrified the villagers. To them, it was part of the threatening jungle that dominated their lives, to Peter it was a toy. And to me as a cat

lover, it was the ultimate cat. Whilst setting out the house, every time a worker took a string and walked to where we pointed, the kitten pounded after him and sent him running in panic. When balls of string were left carelessly lying around, it attacked and battered them all over the site, entangling the work like a Picasso drawing. In between, it lay in ambush behind a rock, pressed to the ground, footpads kneading, ready to attack, and jumping at the first man around the corner. For me, standing on top of a rock, orchestrating the overall view of the string house, it looked like a wonderful ballet, full of beautiful creatures dancing and weaving the transparent house in the jungle. Geoffrey stood below, rather like a rock himself, saying little short things in Sinhalese, making the workers giggle as they fled the leopard and fixed or refixed a string.

When the sky on the first day turned purple and vermillion and black, and the night fell in half an hour, we went to Peter's hut. He wasn't there. There was no electricity, but a dozen kerosene lamps dramatically lighted the hut, and the beer, we knew, was cooled in a kerosene fridge, the best kind of fridge in the world because it is completely silent. The night was deep black and full of strong noises of unseen life, crashing branches, bumps and growls. At first, not knowing Peter's secret life, I went to the typewriter to write my site report, took the lid off and found two Polongas, or Russell's vipers, the most deadly snake in Ceylon, hissing at me. I closed the lid and went to get a beer, opened the fridge to find it stuffed with a small crocodile carcass rolled tightly together and forced in, awaiting skinning. From then on I opened nothing, and when retiring I pulled the bed out to the middle of the floor.

On a visit some months later, when the kitten had grown to a full size leopard and had to be kept away from the site because its

knocked over the men, albeit in play, I went to the bathroom one evening after work. There was no lantern, but I fumbled my way to pee in the dark. Standing, I heard a sudden hiss and was hit with tremendous force from behind by the leopard leaping onto my back to play. The only place on the thousand acres where Peter could keep the leopard safely was of course the only room built of concrete block. We fell over the loo, the leopard and I, and had a loving tumble on the dark floor. A bit like the Russian saying that screwing a tiger is a little bit marvellous and a little bit terrifying. From then on I did what I had to do in the safety of the jungle.

One Saturday I was sitting with Peter under a tree while he paid the salaries. The workers, all jungle villagers, were standing in a long line. The men with their lean bodies had only a string and cloth to cover their private parts, and the women wore sarongs and bodices of cheap cotton. For jungle villagers, who live permanently on the edge of disaster depending on the seasons' favours, (beautifully described by Leonard Woolf in his 1913 novel, *Village in the Jungle*) the salary they get is the difference between insecurity and minimal security. When a string of four beautiful girls with sweet smiles and splendid breasts bursting from their bodices, came to get their salaries, I asked who they were. The daughters of the fellow in front, I was told, and a serious problem to him because he would never be able to get enough money to give them each a dowry, and get them married. So to make the father happy and one of the girls happy and me happy, Peter suggested that I take one of them to Colombo as a servant. I chose the one with the sweetest smile, paid the father seven hundred rupees towards the dowry, promised to pay the daughter seven hundred a month, which was three times the usual servant's salary, and took her to Colombo in the jeep. Because of her

enchanting sweetness and lack of hang-ups, we had a great time. But after about a month I began to realise that this was not all right, and on the next visit I took her home and gave the father enough for her dowry. I was rewarded with smiles and offers of remaining sisters, and left in the knowledge that everyone was happy and that everything was perfectly natural and to everybody's advantage.

The building progressed slowly. An old retired "engineer" from the Public Works Department was hired as resident foreman. Apart from cement and roofing materials and a few electric wires and pipes, all building materials were found on the site. Sand was drawn from the river, dynamiting one of the big round red rocks created stones, timber came from many different kinds of trees in the surrounding jungle. When asked what any particular tree was called, the answer was always: "jungle timber, jungle timber." The columns were coconut palm trunks, polished and with the soft centre removed. Granite footings from a nearby quarry kept termites from entering the hidden inside ends of the columns. The clay floor tiles came from a local wood-fired village kiln, all beautifully bent in the heat of the fire, giving the floor, when wax-polished daily, the look and feeling of old red leather.

The old engineer worked more and more slowly. Sometimes when I came after two or three weeks the heap of materials had only grown a little, and the work had hardly progressed. Usually he said this was because the workers had vanished for fear of wild elephants or because the rains were too heavy.

One day in the monsoon season, I came very late to the site. I had driven up in my open Volkswagen, which had replaced the Fiat and which had a sealed underside. Crossing a river by one of the many so called Irish Bridges, which are marked fords where one can

only guess at the location of the underwater roadway and the depth of the water in the rush of the monsoon flood, I drove slowly across what was usually a trickle. Suddenly the car started rocking like a boat. Since no water was penetrating from below, the car was in fact a boat after the water depth reached the top of the wheels.

The car and I floated and twisted helplessly a hundred yards down the river to the first bend where we were stranded on a little beach surrounded by thick jungle. After a short time somebody, as always, appeared from nowhere and set in motion a huge and efficient rescue operation. Villagers were collected, men, women and children, a chair appeared for me as the honoured guest to sit on and watch the operation, and dozens of laughing bodies pushed and pulled and cut and lifted the car back onto the road, regularly asking me politely to get up so that they could move my chair to the next good vantage point, and brought me hot tea in the rain in an old Nescafe tin from somewhere back in the jungle. All was done with extreme elegance and dignity and polite good humour, as if in a play, with me as the audience. Afterwards there was no money, no gifts, no cigarettes, only a formal, cheerful and polite celebration, and then sending me on my way. No English gentlemen could have behaved finer.

I turned the key in the car, and it started. Arriving after dusk at Polontolawa, I went straight to the work hut to see how things stood only to find it closed. I looked in and saw the engineer sleeping on his mat, with his sarong slipped up to his waist and the unspoken cause of his slowness monstrously visible. Between his legs there were two giant testicles, each the size of a grapefruit and supported by dirty leather straps. The poor man had elephantiasis, a horrible mosquito-borne disease which in the course of twenty increasingly

lethargic years, slowly settles in the legs or elsewhere and swells hugely, eventually leading to an unpleasant death. For fear of losing his job the poor man had hidden his affliction, but could not work. Peter kept him on the payroll, but sent him home and got a young, energetic fellow to finish the job.

The foundations were set out, and cast. The walls were built up to roof level. The water tower was built high to signal the centre of the estate's world with the office where salaries were paid and people hired. The living room was a huge roof with no walls resting on a concrete bridge springing from rock to rock and on polished coconut columns letting the breeze flow through at all times. The room was so big that when the rain came in from one side, you sat on the other side. All the jungle trees were left, but undergrowth and scrub were removed and the ground was covered in gravel out of which the giant rocks and great trees sprang. Since the house had no doors and windows, except to the bedrooms, the site was surrounded by a tall stonewall to keep out wild animals, except for monkeys. At dusk, sometimes, a wild elephant would peer over the wall, and turn away. The roof was our, by now standard, invention of corrugated sheets covered with half round country tiles. Every now and then a band of monkeys settled on the roof and had a great game throwing the tiles around, so apart from polishing the floor and the coconut columns, house maintenance included regularly putting the roof tiles back into place.

The house became an enchanting place. You arrived from outside through the lichgate. From there you passed under a great rock and entered between two rocks into the great big open room with a jungle garden on both sides. You crossed a little bridge to the bedrooms around another rock.

One night, a short time before the house was finished, Peter, who on his lonely nights drank a lot, was driving at great speed along a rocky road across which a drunken villager was lying. He hit him and the poor man died. A police inquiry declared Peter innocent but he was whisked out of the country before anybody heard about it, or could say goodbye, and he was never heard from again. In his place came an elegant young Singhalese couple. The husband was trained in plantation management and the wife was a sleek and beautiful pianist. She brought her grand piano to the jungle, pushing it to one side of the big room in the southwest monsoon, and when the direction of the rain changed in the northeast monsoon she pushed it over to the other side. Playing in her golden silk sari, billowing in the breeze, the ballet of the house continued. But not for long.

I had been warned. At the time, my girlfriend was the daughter of the Trotskyite finance minister. She was a barrister-at-law and beautiful in the manner of an Indian film star. She was also the leader of the Harbour Workers Union, because most of the harbour workers belonged to the same caste as her family. She led massive strikes and demonstrations of poor, shabby workers, marching or writhing ahead of them in an immaculate silk sari and sporting a long silver cigarette holder, whilst shouting communist slogans. One evening she told me that daddy had given her two properties, a rubber estate and a house in Panadura. And her brothers had also got two properties each. I said, "how nice".

The following week daddy's government introduced a new law: Since we lived in a Socialist Democratic Republic, it was not fair that anybody should own more than two properties. Any additional property was to be confiscated or acquired at government evaluation,

which is almost the same thing. This piece of feudal communism mainly damaged the other old families who for the time being were in the opposition and at one swipe lost a great deal of property.

But this socialist principle was applied also to foreign companies, and therefore to Polontolawa. It was confiscated or nationalised, given to a government livestock corporation, and was quickly run down. Today Polontolawa is in a bad way and attempts to save it by buying it back and declaring it a protected national monument have failed.

Polontolawa House

About 20 km inland from Chilaw 1963-64.

Site plan of Polontolawa House. A two meter high stone boundary wall keeps out the big wild animals.

The entrance is from the west (left on plan).

The garden consists of the original large jungle trees. The smaller trees were cleared and gravel and wild grass planted on the ground. Occasionally wild elephants peer over the boundary wall in the background, and turn away.

Page 258-259: Arrival to the house. At left the entrance lych gate, in the middle the estate office and to the right the water tower.

Page 260-261: The house among the rocks.

Page 262-263: The entrance gate. From here you enter the house itself between two rocks.

Page 264-265: The open living room seen from the garden.

Page 266-267: The living room looking towards the entrance between the rocks.

Page 268-269: The living room.

Page 270-271: The trees and rocks are as they were found.

Page 272-273: The bedrooms seen from the garden. All have trellis to keep out the monkeys.

Page 274-275: The water tower.



1. Servants room and water tower, 2. Service yard, 3. Estate office, 4. Kitchen, 5. Toilet, 6. Large open living space, 7. Lounge, 8-9 Bedrooms and bathrooms.

















