

# **Tropical Modernism/Environmental Nationalism: the politics of built space in postcolonial Sri Lanka**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationships between Sri Lanka's tropical architecture, its negotiation of the Sri Lankan environment, and the post-colony's contested politics of nationhood. By focussing on the work of Minnette de Silva, an early pioneer of Sri Lankan tropical architecture, and on the stylistic and aesthetic influences on her work, and hence on contemporary manifestations of the genre, the paper traces the connections between a conscious desire amongst tropical modernists to build *with* Sri Lanka's superabundant tropical nature – rather than guarding against it – and emergent aesthetic constitutions of an avowedly “post-colonial” politics. It goes on to demonstrate how the fluid spatialities, and historical and cultural narrativizations, of de Silva's work have been drawn into hegemonic articulations of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the last few decades, despite her more secular modernist intentions. The paper argues for a situated geopolitical understanding of de Silva's pathbreaking tropical modern architecture.

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## **List of Figures:**

Figure 1: Portrait of Minnette de Silva (reproduced with the kind permission of Helga de Silva Blow Perera and Desmond Perera).

Figure 2: The internal courtyard, Amerasinghe house (photograph reproduced with the kind permission of Helga de Silva Blow Perera and Desmond Perera).

Figure 3: Living area, looking out to internal courtyard, Amerasinghe house (photograph reproduced with the kind permission of Helga de Silva Blow Perera and Desmond Perera).

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...House walls are pierced with openings influenced by traditional economically designed air vents. There are few solid walls; the main structure is carried by reinforced concrete pillars with R.C. flat slab floors. The enclosing walls of louvered or sliding doors and windows or wood or wrought iron trellises direct every available air draught into the house. The roof space is utilized as an attic study. Note niches for *pahanas*.

Notes: the garden, courts and house flow into each other. Materials: flat slab and column structures, woodwork, jackwood polished, colour light cherry sliding doors and windows.

(‘*Pahanas*’ are oil lamps which are traditionally used for celebrations and temple lights in Sri Lanka.)

During the ‘Pirith Ceremony’ (the blessing of the house by monks) the priest made us all laugh as his sermon consisted of consolation for the Amerasinghe’s as their house didn’t appear to be finished, of course it was – he just did not think there was enough decoration or walls to hold the thing up!

Minnette de Silva, Sri Lanka’s pioneering tropical modern architect,  
describing the house she designed for Mrs. A. Amerasinghe in Colpetty,

Colombo, 1954.<sup>1</sup>

Though Sri Lanka’s tropical architecture is more popularly associated with Geoffrey Bawa, by far the most famous of the country’s modernists, it was Minnette

de Silva (Figure 1) who pioneered the style and approach in post-independent Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> As with other mid-twentieth century forms of modern tropical architecture, the style that de Silva helped to inaugurate in Sri Lanka was something of a dialect that adapted international modernism to the climate and superabundant growth of the native tropical environment.<sup>3</sup> De Silva was the first of a generation of Ceylonese architects who, in the absence of a domestic architecture school, trained and developed their expertise and approach at London's Architectural Association (AA). Many of these Ceylonese modernists – including Geoffrey Bawa – studied in the AA's Department of Tropical Architecture, founded in 1954 by Otto Koenigsberger, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. De Silva herself however, graduated from the AA some six years prior to the establishment of that pioneering department, but during her time in the UK was heavily involved with the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). She was influenced by the likes of Fry, Drew, Koenigsberger, as well as other international modernists including Le Corbusier, and was deeply influenced by a prevailing culture of European expertise about the tropics. It was in this essentially EuroAmerican technical and aesthetic ferment that the seeds of de Silva's own tropical style were sown.<sup>4</sup> And it was through these encounters and her training that she developed and pioneered a style that, back in Ceylon, offered what for her was an appropriate means of responding to the rigidities of a colonial culture of building dominated up to independence by the Public Work's Department (PWD). For practitioners like de Silva, approximations of the tropical style offered a value-free techno-scientific challenge, which at the same time held within it the potential to respond to the cultural homogenisation wrought by colonialism.<sup>5</sup> It offered what Anoma Pieris has called, a “utopian and innovative modernist aesthetics of the postindependence period”<sup>6</sup>, which grew in popularity in metropolitan 1950s Ceylon,

especially Colombo, given a significant demand from Ceylon's upper middle class keen to signal their departure from colonial aesthetics.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1: Portrait of Minnette de Silva (reproduced with the kind permission of Helga de Silva Blow Perera and Desmond Perera)

In this paper I delineate some of the ways that de Silva sought through her architecture to embrace the Sri Lankan environment and to pursue a connection between the Sri Lankan inside and outside.<sup>7</sup> I show how this aesthetic effort was centrally implicated in an attempt to build what de Silva and other Sri Lankan modernists regarded as an avowedly “post-colonial” architecture; one whose form embodied and performed what she intended as a break with nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial architecture.<sup>8</sup> But I also argue that despite her rather ambivalent relationship with more virulent strands of anticolonial Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that characterized Ceylon's post-independent political sphere from the mid-1950s onwards, de Silva's own modernism has *lent itself to* the expression of precisely such political articulations via the historiographical, landscape and environmental refrains it enabled.<sup>9</sup> To be clear, my argument is not that Minnette de Silva was in any sense a Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist. Indeed, whatever other cultural intentions she had for her modes of architectural expression, we can stress from the outset that a key condition she set herself was that her architecture transcend the sphere of formal politics. Even though her work performed a break with colonialism,

it was also an articulation of the architect-as-artist's belief in the autonomy of modernism;<sup>10</sup> 'art for art's sake', or rather 'architecture for architecture's sake'. But as I demonstrate in this paper, Sri Lankan tropical architecture should be considered anything but autonomous in terms of the authorial effects it has had in fashioning the historiographical, landscape and environmental narratives of "post-colonial" Sri Lanka.

Any attempt to engage with Minnette de Silva's architecture is compounded by the simple fact that much of her material output has been destroyed. A significant proportion of it has been allowed to fall into disrepair through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and whilst the millennial emergence of a modern architectural heritage industry in Sri Lanka has overwhelmingly focussed on preserving the undeniably important work of Geoffrey Bawa, de Silva's less acclaimed, earlier and thus more pioneering output has too easily fallen prey to the developer's wrecking ball. This material absence may well be a symptom of the gendered authorial politics of Sri Lanka's modernist architectural heritage industry, but that is a provocation beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless, the fact remains that discussions of de Silva's architecture must work with material absence; for example, the Amerasinghe house itself was demolished in 2011. What remains of it are memories and a few textual fragments brought together in de Silva's autobiography, which was published in 1998 just before she passed away. From the fragments of image and text in the book, we can discern that the Amerasinghe house was built around an internal courtyard (Figure 2) which, complete with shrine room, formed an open and connecting space between a living room (Figure 3) on one side of the house, and an open carpool area on the other. Trellised, sliding doors that could be fully opened gave the effect of a fluid and interconnected ground floor with public reception areas open to the outside;

a design which afforded vistas and the circulation of air throughout. As a 1995 letter from the client to de Silva attests, the family in fact spent much of their time in the carpool area because of its “enchanted vistas”.<sup>11</sup> Above the carpool, the building rose to a second level and contained 3 bedrooms and a study. There was another bedroom downstairs, which provided enough space to accommodate the middle class, nuclear family. The property had a low and gently sloping roof covering the first floor that was in perfect alignment with the roof over the ground floor living area, across the courtyard, giving the entire structure a spatial balance, harmony, and uninterrupted visual line.

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here

Figure 2: The internal courtyard, Amerasinghe house (photograph reproduced with the kind permission of Helga de Silva Blow Perera and Desmond Perera)

Figure 3: Living area, looking out to internal courtyard, Amerasinghe house (photograph reproduced with the kind permission of Helga de Silva Blow Perera and Desmond Perera)

De Silva’s autobiography, which provides this material testimony to the Amerasinghe house in its physical absence, is at once scrapbook, diary and a compilation of her architectural work. It is chaotic and difficult to follow. Nonetheless, it is a treasure chest full with de Silva’s iterations, thoughts, and ideas;

glimpses into her main influences, both professional and personal; and of course bursting with visual records of her work.<sup>12</sup> It is a valuable document not just because of these descriptions of buildings long since demolished. Its collected ephemera also offer us the ability to place her work in a wider context not just in terms of what she believed she was doing, and how she believed her work connected to what was transpiring around her in post-independent Ceylon, but also in a wider field of cultural production.

As such, this paper works in the productive confluences between architectural studies and critical geography in a number of ways. It sketches a mid-twentieth century form of tropical modern architectural practice in order to delineate the geopolitical resonances and effects of its historiographical, landscape and environmental refrains. In doing so, my concern in what follows is to elaborate on how a vanguardist form of tropical architectural modernism became entangled in an ethnicized spatial politics of nationalism. By focussing on this mode of environmentally contextual modernism the article maps the tricky confluence of tropical modern architectural practice and banal forms of environmental nationalism. The readings of de Silva's work that follow attend as much to the things she and others say about her work as to the work itself. In this sense, the paper attends to architecture's situatedness in the social and cultural world; what Anthony Vidler, building on Rosalind Krauss' sculptural referents, has referred to as "architecture's expanded field".<sup>13</sup> The paper thus situates Sri Lanka's tropical modernism within a broader set of cultural, ideological and ultimately spatial processes that reveal much about the problematics of a post-independent Sri Lankan nationhood in which the hegemony of the Sinhala-Buddhist ethnos was made present socially, culturally, and as I argue here, aesthetically. As I suggest, it is precisely such aesthetic instantiations

of this hegemony that serve (unwittingly yes) to position non-Sinhala others – Tamils, Muslims and Burghers, for example – as guests, to-be-tolerated by sovereign Sinhala hosts. As such, instead of asking what kind of building de Silva describes in the epigraph to this paper, I tease out the architectural expressions, taxonomic tensions and cultural anxieties that reading across the grain of the quote reveals, and I show how these connect to the spatialization of this kind of post-independent narrative of nationhood.

This kind of critical work mobilizes a body of scholarship that has attempted in different ways to tease out the semiotics of architectural space. Like iconographic approaches to landscape, this work has stressed the politics of architecture's form and theatricality; in other words, the power embedded in its physical and performative signification.<sup>14</sup> For example, such approaches have usefully been deployed to read the symbolism of skyscrapers and other urban edifices, to underscore the allegorical dimensions of urban topologies and building practices, and to allude to the emblematic presence of imperial elsewhere in metropolitan building projects.<sup>15</sup> In essence, this critical and interdisciplinary engagement with architecture has principally foregrounded the representational mechanics through which buildings can be considered signs in semiotic systems of meaning.

Built space, however, is neither autonomous nor self-referential. That is to say, its symbolic resonances, its meanings, are never produced in a vacuum. Architecture as both process and material form exists in and through the world, thus the signification of buildings is irreducibly relational and contingent upon its imbrication in expanded social fields. Accordingly, scholarship at the intersections of architecture, geography and other spatial disciplines has usefully attended to the performative signification and re-signification of buildings through the ways they are used, as well



as through the events and social processes in which buildings are always implicated.<sup>16</sup> Built space, as this work rightly premises, is always given life and meaning through the multiple, contested and contingent ways people make sense of it.<sup>17</sup> This kind of work has shifted the register of critical engagements with architecture from representation to use. However, I do not want to suggest here any false opposition between architecture's symbolism and its appropriation. All buildings are both made (many of which are designed by architects), and used (by clients, publics and by architects themselves). A building's meaning therefore is contingent on its use, which includes factors wholly within the architect's authorial control as well as those outside their sphere of influence.<sup>18</sup> Built space in this sense is very much an event or series of events without end.

In Minnette de Silva's description of the Amerasinghe house for instance, we can read the presence of at least four different implied user groups that convene around the moment described and that moment's semiotic afterlife. First of course are de Silva's clients, the Amerasinghe's themselves, perhaps the most obvious users: a middle class, and professional, nuclear family, which included Dr. Asoka Amerasinghe's mother. The Amerasinghe's were both Buddhist and Sinhalese, though not necessarily immersed in the rising tide of populist Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that was sweeping mid-1950s Ceylon.<sup>19</sup> That they requested de Silva build a shrine room into the structure is thus less an explicit articulation of nationalist intent, and more a symptom of the growing normalization of Buddhist aesthetics in the former colonial capital, Colombo; one more instance of what Nihal Perera has referred to as the indigenisation of the colonial city.<sup>20</sup> Second, the priest and monks invited to bless the house at the Pirith ceremony who, in the Sri Lankan context, represent a public institution (the Buddhist clergy) of considerable power, particularly

in a political and historical context where institutionally they were far more proximate than the Amerasinghes to populist nationalism. Third, de Silva herself, the architect with a sense of her own modernist sensibilities; her desire to narrate her built space is itself a use, an authorial appropriation, of that space. And fourth, the text itself implies a reader: the you or I reading *about* the Amerasinghe house, which is to stress that architecture exists imaginatively and textually beyond its moment of material inception. Architecture's meanings continue to be contingently (re)signified in the present by any number of groups as it is discursively and materially mobilized, or as Jeremy Till puts it, architecture's very meaning "depends" on its continued use and reuse.<sup>21</sup> And it is precisely the uneasy circulation of meaning between Sri Lankan tropical modern architecture's many different users that necessitates an approach that tacks between architectural form itself and its cultural geographies in order to reveal something of the social and political processes in which it is implicated.

### ***Minnette de Silva and "conservative surgery"***

Born in 1918 in Kandy, in Sri Lanka's central highlands, Minnette de Silva secured a place at RIBA and the AA in 1945 to further her own architectural training which had begun in Bombay some years earlier. She came from an upwardly mobile middle class family, whose colonial values and social position within the privileged indigenous classes enabled her to pursue her somewhat unconventional career choice overseas. Her movement to London in 1945 was not uncommon amongst members of this "colonial-ised" upper-middle class. In fact, ideologically at least, coming to London was tantamount to arriving in colonial Ceylon's own capital for many of her peers.<sup>22</sup>

De Silva's writings from her London period (1945-49) betray an awareness of her own difference, her exoticism, in the professional spaces of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architecture), the AA, and the CIAM of the late 1940s. Yet her writings also suggest a certain confidence in her own authority to re-negotiate International Modernism precisely because of her difference. As she put it, she considered herself "really the youngest, a student, and I think the first Asian to have appeared at CIAM".<sup>23</sup> At the 1947 CIAM conference in Bridgewater, near Bristol, for example, de Silva was the delegate for the whole of the India-Ceylon region, and in her words she was "the only Eastern delegate".<sup>24</sup> Professionally, and for much of her early career, she was thrust into the position of intermediary; an architect from the colonial world, born into the "traditions" of "the east" that is to say, yet one whose professional training simultaneously positioned her in those most modern and international spaces of architectural universalism. And it was this kind of architectural double consciousness – her social and cultural interstitiality – that proved central to the translations of international modernism that she felt something of a responsibility to help forge back in Ceylon.

Though the clean lines, simplicity and universalism of Le Corbusian classicism inspired her work (she was to strike a career long friendship with Le Corbusier), it was Patrick Geddes' work in India that offered her the most compelling inroad toward what would become for her a genuinely Ceylonese form of architectural modernism. In her London years, she was given a copy of the book *Patrick Geddes in India* (1947) by its editor, Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, also her good friend and mentor. This small edited compendium of just a fraction of Geddes' writings on his work in India proved especially influential for de Silva. In particular, it was his notion of "conservative surgery" that drew her attention.<sup>25</sup> This approach was an

admonishment of late nineteenth and early twentieth century rational and formal colonial architecture and planning that treated Indian space as tabula rasa, upon which new structures might be driven at the expense of existent structures and infrastructures. Instead, Geddes' "conservative surgery" advocated improvements based upon the best of what existed in the urban milieu; improvements born from a respect for the roots of regional culture.<sup>26</sup> At the same time however, conservative surgery was resolutely modern, not to be confused with a rejection of the material manifestations of "western" modernity. As Lewis Mumford wrote in the Introduction to *Patrick Geddes in India*: "Just because Geddes respected the roots of regional culture, he had no interest in limiting its expression to some historic moment of the past: if the roots were alive, they would keep on putting forth new shoots, and it was in the new shoots that he was interested".<sup>27</sup> It was precisely this fine balance between an attachment to what she saw as the traditions of the region on the one hand, and on the other an attachment to the cutting edge of global architectural (and planning) modernity that attracted de Silva to Geddes' writings; writings in which she was able to envision a roadmap for a new vanguardist Ceylonese architecture:

[Geddes'] Ghandian approach to planning in India was so much common sense and written in 1915! Forgotten notes had been filed away. I have expressed his thoughts again and again whenever I write and talk about architecture and planning. This book should be read by all Asians – not only architects. His idea of "conservative surgery" (instead of the destruction of both community and its life) in the rehabilitation of slums and old villages and townships is now the latest trend... It was the perfect counter-balance to the Corbusian classical; the two complementing each other became the foundation for most of my thinking.<sup>28</sup>

Not only was conservative surgery to prove central to de Silva's attempts to bring Ceylon into modern architectural expression on her terms. As a Ceylonese in the late 1940s, conservative surgery offered de Silva an avowedly "post-colonial" departure that walked in step with Ceylon's political ambition towards independence.<sup>29</sup> For de Silva, and other emerging Ceylonese modernist architects at the time like Geoffrey Bawa and Valentine Gunsekera, the avowedly "post-colonial" potential of this conservative surgical approach was its ability to concretize a rupture with the standardizations of colonial architecture. De Silva's approach anticipated what Kenneth Frampton would come to refer to as "critical regional architecture"; the many local iterations of modern architecture across the world that would reopen and transfigure the burden of modernism's universalisms. Her work aimed at being at once steadfastly local and resolutely modern.

However, just as de Silva sought such new beginnings in Ceylon architecturally, her relationship with colonialism was much more complex than any straightforward rupture with the colonial past. It was, after all, colonialism's class structure that gave her the opportunity to receive an architectural education and training in the UK, and thus her exposure to the International Style was in a very material way enabled by colonialism. Indeed, many of colonial Ceylon's upper middle class communities in fact complicitly tethered themselves to imperial "trusteeship" narratives, believing independence to be but the next and most natural step of colonialism's developmental trajectory.<sup>30</sup> So despite the breaks with colonial architecture that de Silva sought, she also abhorred more obviously anti-colonial nationalist, Buddhist revivalist architecture.<sup>31</sup> For her vanguardist sensibility, this type of religious populism was clearly antithetical to the secularity, simplicity and

functionalism of architectural modernism's élan. De Silva's own tacit acceptance of the trusteeship narrative thus came to shape her propagation of a style of building that looked for a suitably deferential break with colonialism that was able to bring Ceylon's architecture, and thus Ceylon, into modernity *on its own terms*. Her architecture, she believed, was able to shape and articulate a uniquely Ceylonese modernity that represented a break with colonialism, yet was also a continuation of its modernising teleology. It is for this very reason that her description of the Pirith ceremony at the Amerasinghe house is at pains to distinguish her (and her clients') thoroughly modern architectural sensibilities from the priest's fear that the house did not appear to be finished. Her active distancing from his uncomprehending remark betrays a teleology that the house itself performed and embodied.

Aesthetically, if de Silva was influenced by the International Style, she was also inspired by her own proximity to Ceylon's '43 group of modernists; painters like George Keyt, George Claessen and Ivan Pieris, many of whom shared a belief that Ceylon's authentic pre-colonial past was rooted in the Kandyan Sinhala highlands (de Silva was herself from Kandy). In the last half of this paper I return to the importance of this aesthetic influence in delineating the forms of environmental and aesthetic nationalism in which her built space can be implicated. For now, however, I want to stress the more formal techniques through which de Silva's "conservative surgery" was implemented.

### *An Architecture of Opening*

Formally and technically, the attempt to fashion an appropriate movement away from a colonial kind of architecture was premised upon an effort to build space able to recuperate a relationship with Ceylon's native tropical environment. Put simply, de

Silva worked hard to open out the colonial bungalow, itself characterised by stark distinctions between outside and inside space. The colonial bungalow was circulated throughout Empire in pattern books and through colonial administrative itineraries.<sup>32</sup> In colonial Ceylon its purpose was equally geared toward protecting inhabitants from the unruliness of tropical nature, as it was about providing space for rest, privacy, storage, and so forth.<sup>33</sup> As one of Minnette de Silva's contemporaries Valentine Gunasekera put it, the colonial bungalow was in effect a regulated, standardised "PWD [Public Works Department] box" that signified a "feared condition of the outdoors".<sup>34</sup> In seeking and instantiating the ideal of standardisation throughout Empire (albeit always incomplete), the bungalow was therefore emblematic not just of a fear of the outdoors, but of a desire to flatten difference; a desire to standardise built space across Empire.<sup>35</sup> The PWD bungalow was an architectural example of what the anthropologist Paul Rabinow has referred to as "middling modernism"; the rational, standardising and globally expansive concretisation of "progress" in administrative practice and form.<sup>36</sup> Opening the colonial house out was thus a way of literally and materially breaking through the constraints of colonialism's imperial universalisations, and in the process fashioning built space more suited to living with the superabundant tropical growth of the local environment.

For Minnette de Silva and other Sri Lankan tropical modernists after her, adapting and opening out the colonial bungalow involved some quite simple steps to make them more climatically and environmentally suitable. As de Silva put it in an essay she wrote on Regional Architecture, "I had to consider the climatic conditions of the region – sun and glare, rain, wind, and special topography. In Ceylon, climate permits outdoor and indoor activity to be extensions of each other."<sup>37</sup> This regionalist philosophy precipitated a number of simple building techniques: for example, clearing

away bare bulb lighting in favour of the cheaper circulation of natural light, opening walls to maximize transparency and ventilation, which also mimimised the incessant growth of mould. Using asbestos which facilitated a reduction in roof work and in expenditure, and in those instances where the desire was to preserve the large overhanging eaves of colonial bungalows, a common tactic was to uncouple the roof from what had been the colonial house's walls, its main structural feature. As de Silva's description of the Amerasinghe house suggests, walls in fact were a non-essential formal component of this new tropical modern style. Their function was less to enclose and secure a habitable space (plot perimeter walls achieved this purpose), but more, as she put it, to "direct every available air draught into the house".<sup>38</sup>

De Silva's new Ceylonese tropical architecture drew on design elements from Ceylon's varied past to accentuate these conversations between outside and inside space in the new urban home. For example, she began to incorporate the internal courtyard feature that was so prominent in the Amerasinghe house in many of her projects. It was an architectural motif common across a palette of historical Ceylonese building, including Sinhala, Moor and Dutch housing.<sup>39</sup> As in the Amerasinghe house, these open spaces placed within the heart of a structure enable rooms to open directly into a secure interior outdoor space, offering transparency and clear lines of sight through the length and breadth of those structures. The net effects were the sense of fluidity and the liquidity of inside/outside space, and again these can be read from her description of the Amerasinghe house: "Notes: the garden, courts and house flow into each other..."<sup>40</sup> Crucially, though such features were employed commonly across a range of different Ceylonese architectural styles, for de Silva and generations of Sri Lankan tropical modernists after her, they became narrativised as a Kandyan Sinhala



device, the *meda midula*; her formal architectural techniques were discursively mobilising an ethnically exclusive sense of Sinhala tradition and architectural history.

Like other tropical modernists and critical regionalists experimenting at the time, de Silva was also keen to use vernacular and local building materials where possible. Her choice to do this in the late 1940s and early 1950s was a conscious attempt to avoid relying on more expensive imported materials. For de Silva this was an aesthetic as much as economic choice, but one that pre-figured a much broader, enforced, usage of vernacular architectural materials from 1956 onwards as Ceylon's architects were confronted with the nationalist government's first participation in the global non-aligned movement. Working some six or seven years prior to import restrictions that would significantly curtail the choice of materials available to architects from the late 1950s, de Silva consciously chose materials and colours that could bear the environmental stress and evidence of weathering, so enabling outside to meld with inside. For example, a house that friends of her parents commissioned her to build in the hills south of Kandy, caused local residents who were used to smooth finished stonework to complain that the rough, hewn rubble masonry that she used looked dirty. De Silva had of course chosen this material for its patina and its ability to bear the stress of age and weathering. These kinds of vernacularising material choices have become commonplace in contemporary Sri Lankan tropical modernism, the rustic effects they create being highly sought after. For de Silva, such techniques used both inside and outside were yet another way of piercing through the hermetic walls of the "PWD Box", of turning the house inside out.

In addition, de Silva would commonly but sparingly use antique ornamental materials within her built spaces. Either carefully placed or integrated within the structure of the building, these objects tended to signify a desire that her structures

extend out into the time-space of the nation-state beyond. This kind of material reuse is significant insofar as the biographies of things themselves help to animate space, mobilising a historical there and then in the here and now.<sup>41</sup> Ornamental choices that usually involved the careful deployment of a Ceylonese work of classical art or craftsmanship – and usually in de Silva’s case, objects that mobilised Kandyan Sinhala history – were used to create stretched affiliations with the history and geography of the independent nation-state; yet another way of breaking through the colonial spatial template.

De Silva’s pioneering form of tropical modern architecture has been hugely successful both in forging a cutting edge genre of Sri Lankan architectural vanguardism subsequently popularised by the likes of Geoffrey Bawa, Ulrik Plesner and Valentine Gunasekara, and also in staking a conceptual and creative departure from colonialism’s prescriptive architectural universalism; its middling modernism and the proclivity of that middling modernism to flatten difference via the proliferation of the standardised PWD box across Ceylon and throughout empire. Though de Silva’s work was resolutely modernist, inspired as she was by the avant-garde internationalism of the Corbusian classical, her conservative surgical approach powerfully instantiated cultural difference. This was her success; the creation of an indigenous architectural modernism that pre-figured international modernism’s critical regional turn toward geographical and cultural context. Contextually she must be credited for building a kind of building that made a different kind of statement, one that, as Fred Jameson has put it in his critique of critical regionalism, “reaffirms the regional-national culture as a collective possibility in its moment of besiegement and crisis”.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Tropical Modernism as Environmental Nationalism***

Jameson's critique of the inherent conservatism of critical regionalism, and specifically its complicity in the uneven globalisation of capitalism, is useful insofar as it alerts us to the orthodoxies inherent in de Silva's tropical architecture. As innovative as her work was, hers was an architecture that depended on deploying recognisable regional (that is to say cultural-national) elements to perform, and therefore consolidate, difference in what were essential terms. Difference, for de Silva, was to be found in the familiar economies of ethnicity, culture, region, and as I have shown above, it was to be instantiated through the application of her acquired skill and expertise which gave her the ability and authority to formally use architectural techniques that produced emblems of difference that nonetheless were recognizable *as* buildings. The regional-cultural was key to de Silva's tropical modernity in ways that as I show in this section of the paper meant that her architecture could never be considered wholly apolitical as she might have desired. To put this differently, despite her best intentions her buildings have become entangled in the weft and warp of a more militant politics of nationhood in post-independent Sri Lanka. The remainder of this paper elaborates on exactly how the architecture has lent itself to exclusionary narratives of nationhood.

Crucially, for Minnette de Silva, Ceylon's tradition and history were quite specifically located in the newly independent island-state's Kandyan Sinhala heartlands. Her conservative surgical approach actively drew on the sociological and historical experiences of rural life in the Kandyan region. As I have shown in the previous section, she framed structures inspired by the International Style around a desire to bring the "traditionally Sri Lankan" into the modern home: internal courtyards, or *midulas*, verandahs, open air bathing spaces, the use of local at-hand

materials, and local craftsmanship. Her very particular mobilisation of tradition and history instantiated the primacy of the national thought retroactively as Sinhala-Buddhist in a post-independent context when the newly independent nation-state was politically negotiating the accommodation of an ethnically plural polity that included Ceylonese Tamils, the majority of whom are Hindu, as well as Muslims and the Dutch/Portuguese Burgher community. It is worth adding here that the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan “national” itself, not to mention its congruence with island-wide territoriality, was something of a chimera until the British conquered the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815.<sup>43</sup> But as de Silva herself put it:

Much of my work has been based on finding a workable synthesis of traditional and modern architecture. Throughout my childhood I had lived and moved among Kandyan craftsmen and artists. When I was a child my parents, who were greatly influenced by Mr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, used to take us to Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and other ancient places. I would gaze at the beautiful columns and sophisticated structures which the master builders of the ‘Golden Age’ had left for posterity. All this seeped into my unconscious mind, later manifesting itself in my work...

My parents had kept our roots intact for my generation, but now I had to interpret this in architecture. I decided to live in Kandy, it being the centre of Ceylon and the heart of our *national tradition*.<sup>44</sup>

Her equation of traditional arts and crafts with Kandy, and those with the sign of “the national” is telling, as is her reference to the pre-eminent South Asian art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy’s seminal 1908 monograph *Medieval Sinhalese Art* was itself enabled by the Sinhalese arts and crafts movement.

The monograph was a manifesto of sorts calling for a modern revival of that tradition, and it was published at a time when the historical narrative of the national within the colonial was being cemented as Sinhalese and Buddhist.<sup>45</sup> Coomaraswamy's text became part of that ideological terrain. Its focus on "traditional" and "Sinhala" arts and crafts effectively ethnicised an eclectic history of arts and crafts in the island. As the anthropologist Pradeep Jeganathan has written, Coomaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhalese Art* therefore stands within the critical, educated and cosmopolitan margin of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism because of its contribution to an ethnicising history of material culture and craftsmanship.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Minnette de Silva's vanguardist effort to marry elements of the traditional Sinhala crafts movement with her iterations of the architectural modern were forged through an idiom that squarely equated the newly independent Ceylonese national with the Sinhala Buddhist.

De Silva's family upbringing as a Sinhala-Buddhist in Kandy would have influenced her understandings of history, tradition and their Sinhala Buddhist contents at the national scale. However, they also owe much to her association with Sri Lanka's own modernist movement, the '43 Group, and in particular her friendship with the painter George Keyt, whom she met through her mother's cousin Lionel Wendt, a founder of the group. The group was formed as a group of colonial-ised elite artists sought out their own version of anti-colonialism within the larger sweep of the national struggles that gained momentum in mid-twentieth century South Asia.<sup>47</sup> Their work to forge a distinctively Sri Lankan artistic modernism combined European modernist trends, such as cubist pictorial language and expressionism, with Orientalist themes that spoke to Ceylonese particularity. But once again, that particularity was articulating a sense that the contours of a "post-colonial" national to-come were contiguous with a Sinhala-Buddhist tradition, historiography and

aesthetics whose cultural and geographical kernel was the Kandyan kingdom. In de Silva's book she reproduces an essay by George Keyt on *Folk Culture of Ceylon* that begins with the lines:

The survival of folk culture in a small country like Ceylon is astonishing when we take into consideration the later history of the Island. The occasional raids and invasions from Southern India in ancient times were not culturally destructive..., because the cultural structure of Ceylon was fundamentally an Indian extension. But destructive forces of an alarming nature made their appearance when, ..., Ceylon began to stagnate and was finally subjugated by the sweeping domination of three successive powers from Europe...

Largely responsible for the survival of the Ceylonese folk and classical culture was the Buddhist religion, a faith which was somehow preserved through the centuries since Asokan times...<sup>48</sup>

Keyt's words encapsulate a historiographical refrain that pervaded the broader sweep of post-war artistic, architectural and literary modernism in Sri Lanka: foreign contamination of an idealised pre-colonial Sinhala-Buddhist "national" came, the modernists thought, both from South Indian invasions and European colonialism. Though the latter was deemed more destructive, the former was still marked out under the sign of "invasion", and thus as ethnicised difference, coded Tamil. Through such historiographical refrains Sinhala-Buddhism is naturalised under the sign of the national, marked as coming before history so to speak, precisely so it can be recuperated through modernism.

It is in this context that we can locate de Silva's persuasive and seductive efforts to break through the "PWD Box" architecturally, to produce built space in

which a communion between self and the quintessentially Sri Lankan environment can be read. Tropical modernism's illusion of fluid spatiality, the formal architectural effort to root structures in the environment beyond, was in de Silva's experimentations and innovations always an effort to mobilise an environmental and historical beyond marked idiomatically as Sinhala and Buddhist. These were the national striations, the re-territorialisations, that her tropical modernity performed. The native environment has been key to the trajectory of Sri Lankan tropical modernity, but in ways that designate "environment" as a noun referencing a cultural-historiographical-regional world marked as much by text, narrative and history as it is by bio-physical properties.

When we look once more at the quote with which this paper began, it is easy to see the Sinhala Buddhist striations of de Silva's new Ceylonese tropical modernity. The Amerasinghe house is narrated by the architect in ways that quite obviously position it to and amongst all its users as an essentially Buddhist and Sinhala structure, albeit a thoroughly modern one. In other words, for de Silva the house is replete with an aesthetics that is coded Buddhist through and through. It is thus sacred, but not in the tradition of institutionalized and formal religion that the Buddhist priest and monks invited to bless the Amerasinghe house represent. And this is the point. As much as the materiality of the house itself, it is de Silva's narration – her slightly anxious humour at the priest's uncomprehending remarks about the house's apparent partial completion – that helps the building's sacredness, its Buddhist aesthetics that is to say, along into modernity. Here in the Amerasinghe's modern tropical house, the sacred ceases to be a counterpoint to modernity, just as the non-secular Sinhala Buddhist nation becomes modern on its own terms.<sup>49</sup> We are left to wonder what space is made available for post-independent Ceylon's non-Sinhala

Buddhist others? Tamils, Muslims and Burghers, for example? We can be sure that they and other others were welcome across the threshold of de Silva's tropical modern built space, but welcomed as *guests* by a host whose very Sinhala-Buddhist sovereignty helped to inscribe otherness, and hence marginality, onto those guests.

As I have argued in this article, despite its authors' best intentions, Sri Lanka's tropical modern architecture can never be considered simply 'art for art's sake'.

Though architects like Minnette de Silva, and after her Bawa, seemed to go out of their way to avoid addressing Sinhala nationalism's explicit political manifestations, the Sinhala Only Language Act of 1956 or the 1958 ethnic riots for example, my argument in this paper is that de Silva's architecture is not a form of cultural production that transcends politics. I have made visible the social, spatial and political processes in which early Sri Lankan tropical architecture was implicated; its expanded field so to speak. Minnette de Silva's vanguardist architecture from the mid twentieth-century onwards has been one form of cultural production that has helped to naturalise a spatial logic that strongly locates the Sri Lankan national within the Sinhala ethnos, and it did this via the aesthetic resources she mobilised and drew upon to fashion her thoroughly modern architectural expressions: environmental and landscape histories, materialities, and historiographical refrains through which an avowedly "post-colonial" national was coincident with the Sinhala Buddhist. That her work has been so influential in forging a whole genre of Sri Lankan tropical modern architecture only reinforces the necessity of an approach able to evoke the political geographies of this kind of built space, just as tropical modernists would claim their modernism's artistic transcendence of the political sphere.



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<sup>1</sup> Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect* (Smart Media Productions: Colombo, 1998), 233.

<sup>2</sup> For comprehensive reviews of Geoffrey Bawa's work, see David Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: the complete works* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2002); and David Robson, *Beyond Bawa: modern masterworks of monsoon Asia* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Lilian Chee, Jiat-Hwee Chang with Bobby C. T. Wong, "Introduction – Tropicality-in-motion: situating tropical architecture", *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 32 (2011): 277-282, 277; also see Liane Lefaivre, and Alexander Tzonis, "The suppression and rethinking of regionalism and tropicalism after 1945," in A. Tzonis, L. Lefaivre and B. Stagno, *Tropical architecture: critical regionalism in the age of globalization* (Wiley-Academy: Chichester, 2001); Phillip Goad and Anoma Pieris, *New Directions in Tropical Asian Architecture* (Singapore: Tuttle, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> On the colonial prehistory of tropical architecture, see Jiat-Hwee Chang, *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Lilian Chee et al., "Tropicality-in-motion: situating tropical architecture", 277-8

<sup>6</sup> Anoma Pieris, "'Tropical cosmopolitanism'? The untoward legacy of the American style in postindependence Ceylon/Sri Lanka," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 32 (2011): 332-349, 332

<sup>7</sup> This paper builds on previous work in which I have delineated the ethnicizing political implications of built and environmental spaces in Sri Lanka through which experiences of inside and outside become aesthetically and narratively indistinguishable. As I have argued, such environmental and spatial experiences, which were important to architectural work by the likes of Geoffrey Bawa and Minnette de Silva, cannot be separated from a broader field of cultural and aesthetic production in which Sinhala-Buddhist aesthetics is both spatialized and

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hegemonic. See Tariq Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity: nature, environment and the postcolonial geographies of Sri Lankan nationhood* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> In this paper I write the term “post-colonial” (with hyphen and scare quotes) to signal the architect’s conscious relationship with colonialism.

<sup>9</sup> Though Ceylonese independence was a relatively peaceful process, the independent nation-state’s first constitution lacked a bill of right affording effective formal protection for minority communities. In the mid-1950s a more ethnically polarized political context emerged, and in 1956, S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike – the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate – swept to electoral victory on a platform of left, populist Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, fuelled by explicitly anti-Christian, anti-Tamil, and anti-Plantation Tamil positions. This was the beginning of a sustained and lasting period of Sinhala-Buddhist political and cultural hegemony that has led to conditions of insecurity for ethnic minority populations in post-independent Sri Lanka; conditions that precipitated Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war, and arguably continues today. See Tariq Jazeel and Cathrine Brun, “Introduction: spatial politics and postcolonial Sri Lanka”, in C. Brun & T. Jazeel eds., *Spatialising Politics: culture and geography in postcolonial Sri Lanka* (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage, 2009) 5-12; Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: a history of contested identities* (Sri Lanka: Vijatha Yapa Publications, 2006), 220-26.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Bürger, (trans. by Michael Shaw) *Theory of the avant-garde* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1984), 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> In de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, 236.

<sup>12</sup> Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, “Crafting Regionalism: Minnette de Silva and an Asian Modern Architecture,” *Journal of Architecture* (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Vidler, “Architecture’s Expanded Field,” *Artforum* 42, no.8 (2004), 142-148.

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<sup>14</sup> Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., *The iconography of landscape: essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Mona Domosh, “The symbolism of the skyscraper: case studies of New York’s first tall buildings”, *Journal of Urban History* 14 no.3 (1988), 321-345, and “A method for interpreting landscape: a case study of the New York World Building”, *Area* 21 no.4 (1989), 347-355; Penelope Woolf, “Symbol of the second empire: cultural politics and the Paris opera house”, in D. Cosgrove & S. Daniels (eds.), *The iconography of landscape* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988) 214-235; Donald McNeill, “Skyscraper geography”, *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (2005), 41-55. For geographical scholarship on allegory and urban space, see James S. Duncan, *The city as text: the politics of landscape interpretation in the Kandyan kingdom* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990); Nihal Perera, “Indigenising the colonial city: late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Colombo and its landscape”, *Urban Studies* 39 no.9 (2002), 1703-1721. For work on imperialism, architecture and urban space, see Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of empire: postcolonialism and the city* (Routledge: London & New York, 1996); Felix Driver and David Gilbert (eds.), *Imperial cities: landscape, display, identity* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> See Chee at al., “Tropicality-in-motion: situating tropical architecture”; Donald McNeill, “Skyscraper Geography”; and Loretta Lees and Richard Baxter, “A ‘building event’ of fear: thinking through the geography of architecture”, *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12 no.2 (2011), 107–122; Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, Iain Borden (eds.), *Gender, Space, Architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction* (Routledge: London, 1999); Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Alicia Pivaró, Jane Rendell (eds.), *Strangely Familiar: narratives of architecture in the city* (Routledge: London, 1996); Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying architecture: between the architecture and the user* (Routledge: London, 1998); Oli Mould, “Brutalism Redux:

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relational monumentality and the urban politics of Brutalist architecture”, *Antipode* (early online).

<sup>17</sup> As well as through the ways that building shift into disuse, see Stephen Cairns and Jane Jacobs (eds.), *Buildings Must Die: a perverse view of architecture* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> See Jeremy Till, *Architecture depends* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> See fn. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Nihal Perera, “Indigenising the Colonial City: late nineteenth century Colombo and its landscape”, *Urban Studies* 39 No.9, 1703-1721

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*; also see Tariq Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity*, 145-65.

<sup>22</sup> See Tariq Jazeel, “Postcolonial geographies of privilege: transnational politics of personhood and the ‘Sri Lankan Women’s Association in the UK’”, *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 31 no.1 (2006), 19-33; and Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: the Imperial metropolis* (Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, p.100.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Geddes, “Conservative Surgery”, extracts in J. Tyrwhitt (Ed.), *Patrick Geddes in India* (Lund Humphries: London), 40-59, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Geddes, “Conservative Surgery”, 47; also see N. Khan, “Geddes in India: town planning, plant sentience, and cooperative evolution”, *Environment and Planning d: Society and Space* 29 (2011), 840-856

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- <sup>27</sup> Lewis Mumford, "Introduction", in J. Tyrwhitt (Ed.), *Patrick Geddes in India* (Lund Humphries: London) 7-13, 8
- <sup>28</sup> Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, p.100.
- <sup>29</sup> Independence was granted on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>30</sup> Tariq Jazeel, "Postcolonial geographies of privilege: transnational politics of personhood and the 'Sri Lankan Women's Association in the UK'", *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 31 no.1 (2006), 19-33
- <sup>31</sup> Anoma Pieris, *Imagining modernity: the architecture of Valentine Gunasekera* (Stamford Lake (Pvt) Ltd. & Social Scientist's Association: Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2007), 2.
- <sup>32</sup> Anthony J. King, *The bungalow: the production of a global culture* (Routledge & Keegan Paul: London, 1984).
- <sup>33</sup> Anoma Pieris, "'Tropical cosmopolitanism'? The untoward legacy of the American style in postindependence Ceylon/Sri Lanka", 339.
- <sup>34</sup> Anoma Pieris, , *Imagining modernity: the architecture of Valentine Gunasekera*, 48
- <sup>35</sup> Peter Scriver, "Empire-building and thinking in the Public Works Department of British India", in P. Scriver and V. Prakash (eds.), *Colonial Modernities: building, dwelling and architecture in British India and Ceylon* (Routledge: London & New York, 2007), 69-92.
- <sup>36</sup> Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: norms and forms of the social environment* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1995).
- <sup>37</sup> Minnette de Silva, "Twenty-Five years of Experiments in Modern Regional Architecture in Sri Lanka & India", reproduced in de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, 116.

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<sup>38</sup> Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, 233.

<sup>39</sup> There is also plenty of precedent for internal courtyards in Hindu domestic architecture.

<sup>40</sup> Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, 233.

<sup>41</sup> See Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, *Second Hand Cultures* (Berg: Oxford, 2003); Arjun Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986); and Caitlin DeSilvey, "Art and archive: memory-work on a Montana homestead", *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 no.4 (2007), 878-900.

<sup>42</sup> Fred Jameson, "The Constraints of Postmodernism", in Neal Leach [ed.], *Rethinking Architecture: a reader in cultural theory* (Routledge: London and New York, 1997), 247-254, 254.

<sup>43</sup> Tariq Jazeel, "Reading the geography of Sri Lankan island-ness: colonial repetitions, postcolonial possibilities", *Contemporary South Asia* 17 no.4 (2009), 399-414; Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the modern age*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, 114 & 115, my emphasis.

<sup>45</sup> Pradeep Jeganathan, "Disco-very: Anthropology, nationalist thought, Thamothersampillai Shanaathanan, and an uncertain descent into the ordinary", in N. Whitehead (ed.), *Violence* (School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, 2004), 185-202, 194; Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (eds.), *Unmaking the nation: the politics of identity and history in modern Sri Lanka* (South Focus Press, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Pradeep Jeganathan, "Disco-very", 194.

<sup>47</sup> Jagath Weerasinghe, "Contemporary art in Sri Lanka", in B. Turner (ed.), *Art and social change* (Panduanus books: Canberra, 2005), 180-192.

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<sup>48</sup> George Keyt in Minnette de Silva, *The life and work of an Asian woman architect*, 144.

<sup>49</sup> Tariq Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity*.