

In 1958 I sailed to Ceylon by steamship and on disembarking fell in love with the amusing, intelligent and indolent individuals who live on this rich island (from which an ancient arab traveller once reported that there was only forty miles to paradise, a distance that has yet to be bridged).

Moved by fate as well as the conviction that Buddhism is the only religion that makes sense, I came for a year and have stayed on and off for fourteen.

Architecturally speaking, the country suffered from post-colonial self-denigration. Good things came from England and some people enthusiastically believed in things like »American Style« and Vinyl Floors. – The country's own excellent building traditions and crafts, unnoticed and unmourned, were slowly disintegrating.

Most new buildings were a reflection of western ways, climatically unsuitable and visually indifferent. Two architects, Andrew Boyle and Minette de Silva, had built some good houses, but they were too few to arouse the public consciousness.

For most of the next nine years I worked together with Geoffrey Bawa, just then returned to Ceylon from the A.A. in London. I learned from his amusing poetry, he from my poetic professionalism.

Though each looked after his own work, every building we did was shared in spirit and in much detail. It was work unfettered by regulations or technical complexities. One dealt with the weather, people, money, and traditional materials: brick and wood, old skills and a way of life as well as the joy of living.

The underlying objective fact is that in all Sri Lanka, with the exception of Colombo, nature and history are richly beautiful, and people are amusingly civilized and impervious to humdrum dedication. This magic mixture has bewitched and been absorbed by many visitors, like Leonard Wolf, to

whom the happiest years of his life were those spent in Ceylon. – To other visitors, unfortunately, the lack of true dedication is a stumbling block, which fed by daily ramifications, often grows to insuperable dimensions.

The beauty of nature is all-pervading. Large strong clouds move slowly across the brilliant sky. Everything is seen against a background of constant change and drama, of light and wind and sudden rain. The sun is fiercely hot wherever it falls, but the air itself is cool in the shade and delightful in the breeze. Sometimes one hears a sound like that of a distant express train, and suddenly the house is hit by a wind that bends the trees, instantly followed by a driving rain that breaks into a flying soaking mist over roofs and pavings. – The rain stops as suddenly as it started, the sun appears again, and the puddles under the roof-leaks evaporate. The plants look richer and greener and the bamboo grows another four inches.

The plants are a great richness and no building or town-plan can be conceived without them. They exist in all shapes, sizes and colours, and have an inner force to grow and spread, making European planting look cold, slow and discouraging. They are part of life, and people and plants are inseparable. So much of life is outdoors. People sit below plants, appear and vanish behind them, walk under them and lean against them, and gossip in their shade. They are part of every house. They behave like those magic pellets one put in a glass of water and watched while in the course of a minute they unfolded into marvellous flower shapes and colours. – In some parts of Sri Lanka it is common to make hedges out of six foot long sticks, planted close together in a row. In a week the sticks have roots below and leaves on top, and after six months a beautiful thick hedge springs from a neat row of stems. – Plants and trees are, just as inevitably, part of any new house or plan. – They should, however, not be invited indoors but be kept outside

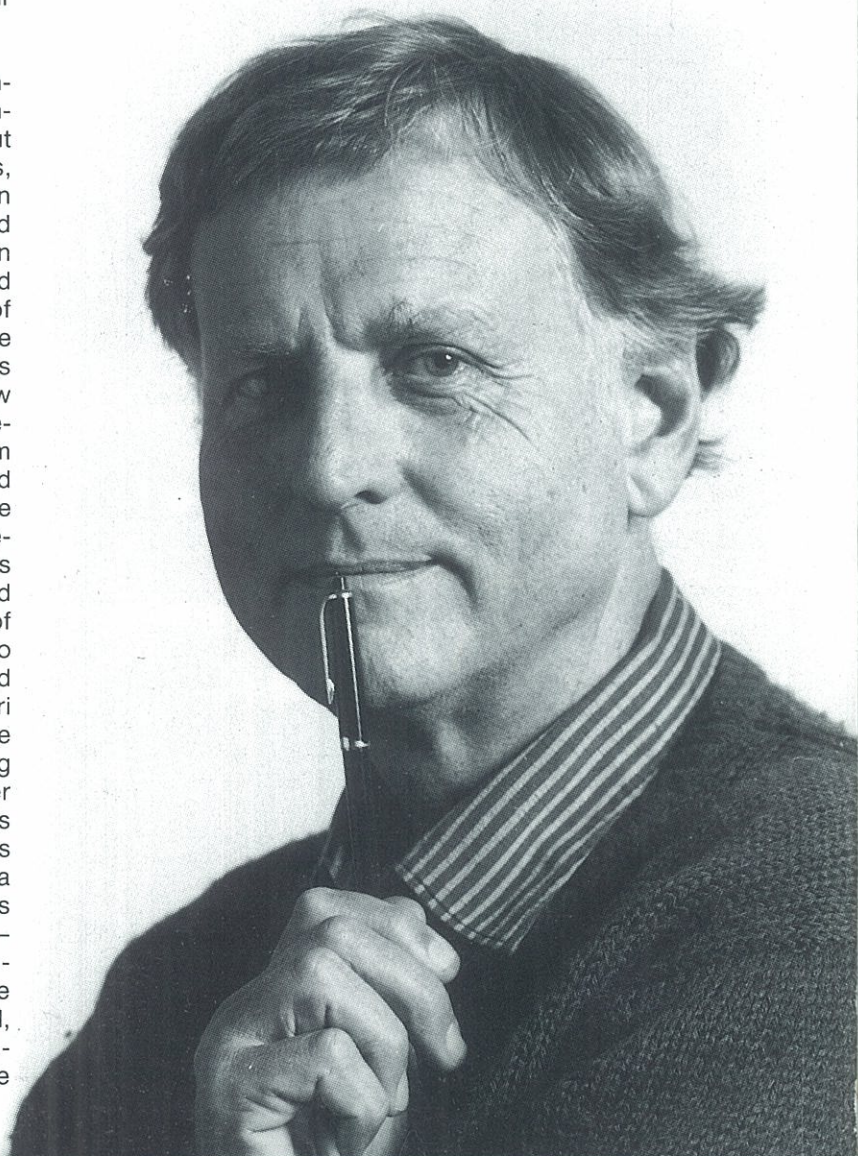
ULRIK PLESNER

“The most wonderful buildings and towns are the ones, which are loved and cared for by those who live in them. – We have discovered so many things but not quite what it is in buildings that gives joy. It has something to do with each person's relation to the building, whether it stimulates his imagination, gives him the desire to use it, or allows him to dream in it. – Buildings are also homes for our souls.”

Ulrik Plesner

Ulrik Plesner was born in Italy in 1930 of an English mother and Danish father. He was brought up in Denmark and graduated from the Architectural School at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen in 1955.

Practiced for three years in Denmark and England. Won awards in several competitions. Greatly interested in Buddhism, and in 1958 went to Ceylon to work. 1968-71 worked with Arup Associates in London. Established own practice in Israel in 1972. 1976-77 city architect in Jerusalem. From 1983 responsible for the Mahaweli Building Program in Sri Lanka.



where they belong, to avoid the fate of Angkor Wat.

On the human side, Ceylon is a small-scale, post-feudal and post-caste society. Houses, schools, small factories, small hotels, any small project that can be dealt with by a man or a single family, gets done, sometimes very well. Anything bigger, needing a consortium of more men or more families, or a big impersonal set-up, as well as impersonal unrelenting organization, critical paths, or routine sequences, rarely gets off the ground as nobody here really believes in strangers and processes. – Any successful large scale undertaking is usually a partnership between a Lankan and a foreign firm.

My first nine years in the early sixties when Ceylon was turning in on itself, were busy ones for me, with projects of a human and manageable size – whereas now in the eighties, where Sri Lanka is successfully opening its door to the West, work has been on a larger national scale.

There was a lot of work to do in the sixties, houses, housing schemes, schools, small factories, small hotels, etc. Coming from a super organized country like Denmark, I had the pleasure of doing what I felt was worthwhile work, without interference, as well as a sense of spreading the truth in paradise, giving the peacocks a brush and a pot of paint, helping people to use their talent, and experiencing the joy of working with them. – Whether it was luck, or the right moment, or whether Ceylon, and later Sri Lanka, always had such latent talent, I don't know. But it all seemed to come together in those years.

On my part, it was a process of first clearing away the shabby, the asbestos roofing, the bare bulb lighting, the disastrous flat roofs, the imported rubbish, the slimy black mouldy walls without drip ledges, the admiration for the second rate from Europe, and slowly by example and knowing what one was talking about, clear the undergrowth and see the birds emerge in full feather. It

was, seen in retrospect, a teaching job, though at the time it was carried by a generally non-speculative enthusiasm and a missionary zeal to help others to see the light.

The work took three forms:

1. Designing and building,
2. Finding, recording and writing about old buildings, and
3. Teaching at the Architecture School.

1. Much was designed and built, including the two houses illustrated here. – The function of a house in Sri Lanka as well as most small scale non-tech buildings, is to shelter the inhabitants from the sun and the rain, provide privacy, safety, and poetry, and to invite the breeze to pass freely through by day and night, all year round. Sri Lanka has a one climate year, no winter/summer or daytime/nighttime temperature differences, making life easy for the house builder.

In due time, I introduced many of the concepts, which we used and they have since become part of the country's architectural vocabulary:

The large protective tiled roof whose geometry dominates the plan of a building, the internal courtyards, trellises, the long view through alternate rooms and courts, the high sometimes rather anti-social, privacy walls in tight towns, the relevancy of past architecture, and underlying this, the functional approach: that a building must absolutely and pleasantly serve the purpose for which it was built. All of which are now obvious, through the last principle is often forgotten.

Daily work consisted mostly of designing, and working out suitable construction principles, roof connections, doors and windows, stairs, etc., components which everybody seemed to be ignorant of. – Ideas and concepts never lacked enthusiasm and quickly took on a life of their own, but the many little things, the details which make it work and in which God also resides, were, with the arrogance of a feudal society, left to others down the line, with shabby results. – My urge was to put the

ship in order, to fix the bolts and nuts before setting to sea – a worthwhile but unfinishable and unachievable job, due mainly to an unyielding national character and social laws.

2. The second path was »Discovering Old Buildings«. – The last four centuries are not considered a great period in the national history, but excellent architecture survives from these centuries, mostly religious buildings and country- and town-houses. They are a synthesis of the building tradition surviving from Lanka's great eleventh century past, and the later outside and colonial influences. Since there were no records, and the buildings were unappreciated even by their owners, who rarely tore them down, as they could not afford to replace them (poverty being unfortunately the only effective preserver of culture), most of these buildings had to be discovered by aimless wandering, or hunted down like elusive animals, by asking, following leads, and sometimes by carrying drawing boards across the paddyfields.

I was amazed by the silence surrounding this heritage and managed to assemble a small group of young likeminded enthusiasts. We used the techniques that I had acquired from working on old castles for the Danish National Museum, and in the course of three or four years, while hunting around the country in a jeep full of drawing boards, t-squares and thermoses, we found, identified and did measured drawings of a number of beautiful old and valuable buildings.

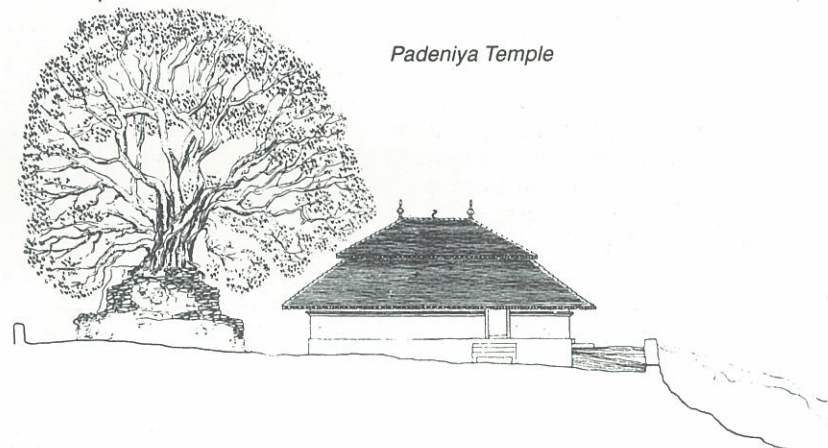
Our knowledge of the history of architecture was rudimentary, as there were no serious books or existing research on

the subject, and none of us were scholars. But we were architecture spotters. We were like butterfly lovers, chasing a vanishing species, driven by the thrill of the chase.

Through lecturing and writing and through a weekly series of newspaper articles describing and illustrating these finds, we showed their relevance to Lanka's history and tradition. How the old buildings, in terms of climate, suitability and even construction, were superior to, more beautiful, and even more modern in the true sense, then what was then thought of as modern architecture.

Slowly this work created a national awareness of the country's building tradition. The work has since been continued, off and on, and greatly expanded by Laki Senanayake, Barbera Sansoni and Anjelendram, the main spirits of the group, and joined in serious academic enquiry by the architect historian Ronald Lewcock.

3. The third path was teaching at the new architecture school in Colombo: Since the technical problems of most buildings and planning in Sri Lanka are uncomplicated (single climate, little high tech or high rise, no realistic legal enforcement), I taught for a number of years what one might call »The extremely simple logic of planning and construction«. This evolved from the conviction that architecture is first a craft, second an art, and rarely a philosophy (except when the former two are failing). No theories. How does one plan a school, or a housing scheme. How do you construct a roof that does not leak, keeps cool and looks nice, doors and windows that let in light and air, keep out thieves, mosquitoes



Padeniya Temple

and storms and don't sag, etc. Through the common sense of this, we arrived I believe, at a generation of architects to whom the climate, materials and traditions of Ceylon were an inspiration and not an obstacle.

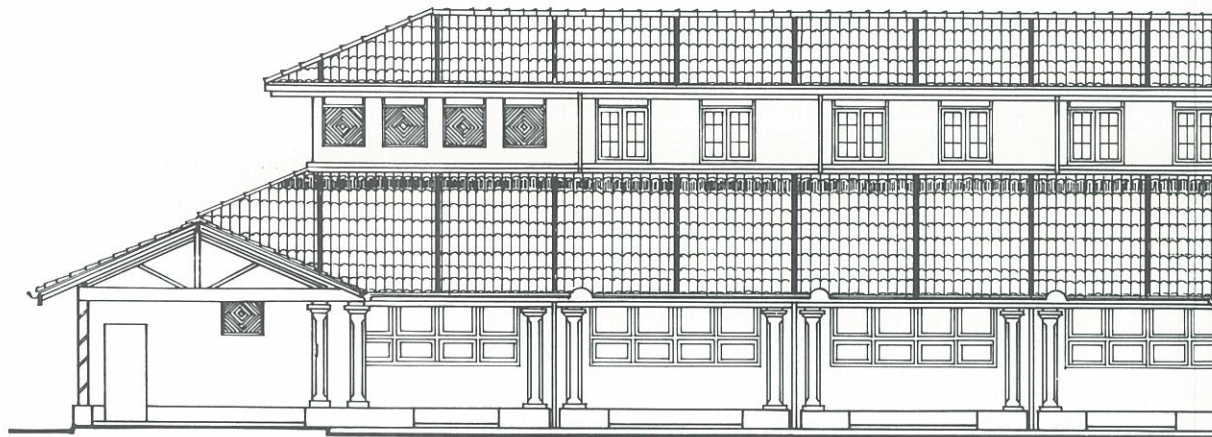
All the students who received scholarships abroad have, as far as I know, returned to their country and are practicing successfully there. Because they were prepared and able to reconcile what they learned and saw abroad, with what they found at home, they knew the tools of their trade. And working in continuation of their tradition is their greatest source of strength.

I left Ceylon in 1967 and returned in 1981 to set up a Planning and Architecture Office at the request of the Minister of Mahaweli Development (supported by DANIDA and the World Bank). Upon returning, I found a new kind of Ceylon with a new name. The Project is the centerpiece of the government's great modernization drive which includes damming the Mahaweli River in five places, doubling the country's electric power generation, and controlling water to provide a million people with new agricultural lives on irrigated former jungleland.

The Mahaweli Architectural Unit plans the new towns and large numbers of small buildings like schools and hospitals. It plants tens of thousands of trees and tries to protect the landscape from unnecessary damage and erosion. – We try to make towns which ten years from now will be pleasant to live and work in, which will have shade and an attractive urban quality for the farmer settlers of the area as well as for the middle class who will live there, doctors, nurses, teachers, shopkeepers, etc.

We also try to establish or re-establish good building practices that can survive when the towns take off on their own, and grow from what we hope is a healthy start.

Within the limitations of very tight financing and timing, as



well as basic problems of co-ordination, bureaucracy, personnel, and a very large number of small scale village contractors, we are building up a series of simple, logical and handsomely constructed building types. These consist of shelters for varying purposes such as maternity wards, out-patient wards, a class-room block, school library, etc. All of which are complete and can be tendered for and built separately or in any combination with others. All have large tile roofs with low eaves, which give shade and protection, are cheap and efficient, open to the breeze on two sides, and can add or subtract ceilings, windows, special equipment, etc., and all can be connected to the next by covered walkways.

The idea is to use small local contractors and the available

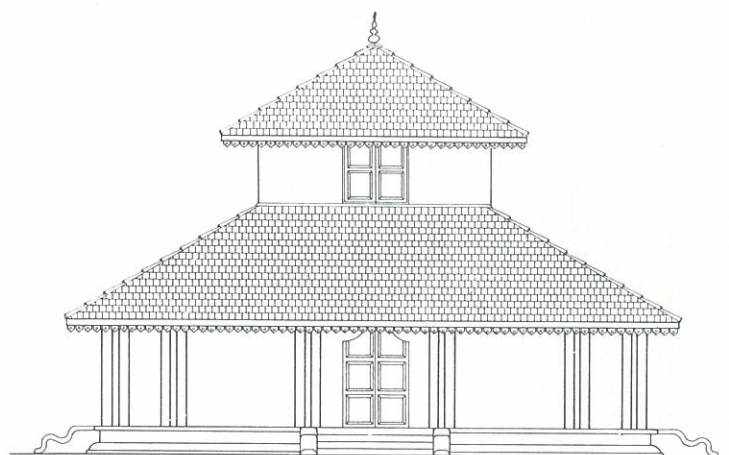
skills and equipment in order to strengthen and employ the residents and settlers of the area.

The buildings are concentrated around streets and squares with huge shade trees covering the public areas for standing, sitting, waiting, parking and traffic. – The idea is to make buildings and towns which are not technically innovative, but where the improvements in construction, usefulness, comfort, beauty and pleasure are experienced and appreciated by the inhabitants in a way that takes root and lives on by itself.

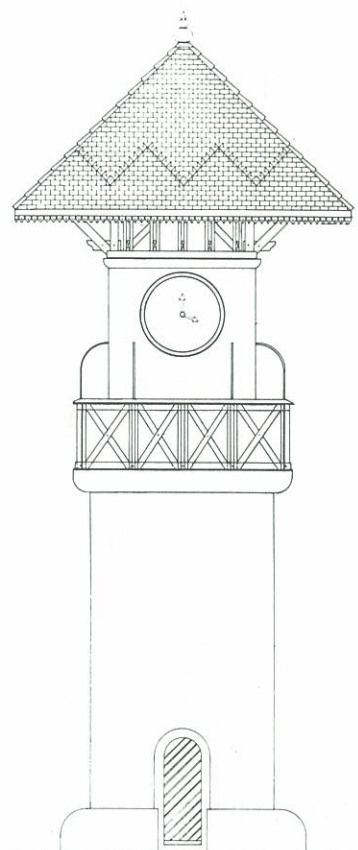
The fact that this is possible, is due to the experience gained from work in the sixties, where many of the improvements and features which seemed to make good sense have become the accepted, some-

times even cliched solution of the present. – I believe that there is no better (or cheaper) way of introducing progress than from within.

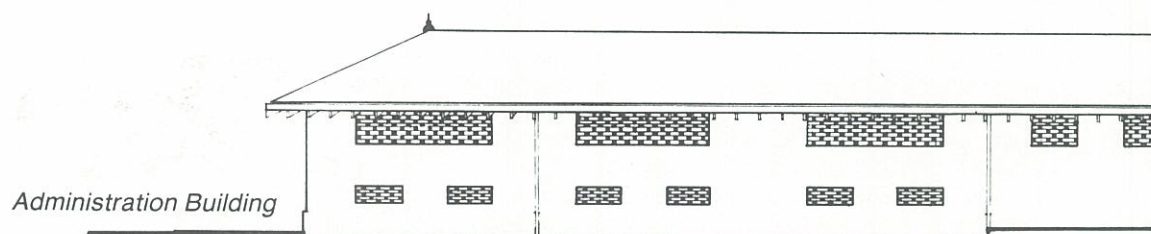
Sri Lanka is now experiencing a difficult time in its life. Although the present government of President Jayawardena created a massive and successful modernization program, there are black clouds on the horizon, two of which in



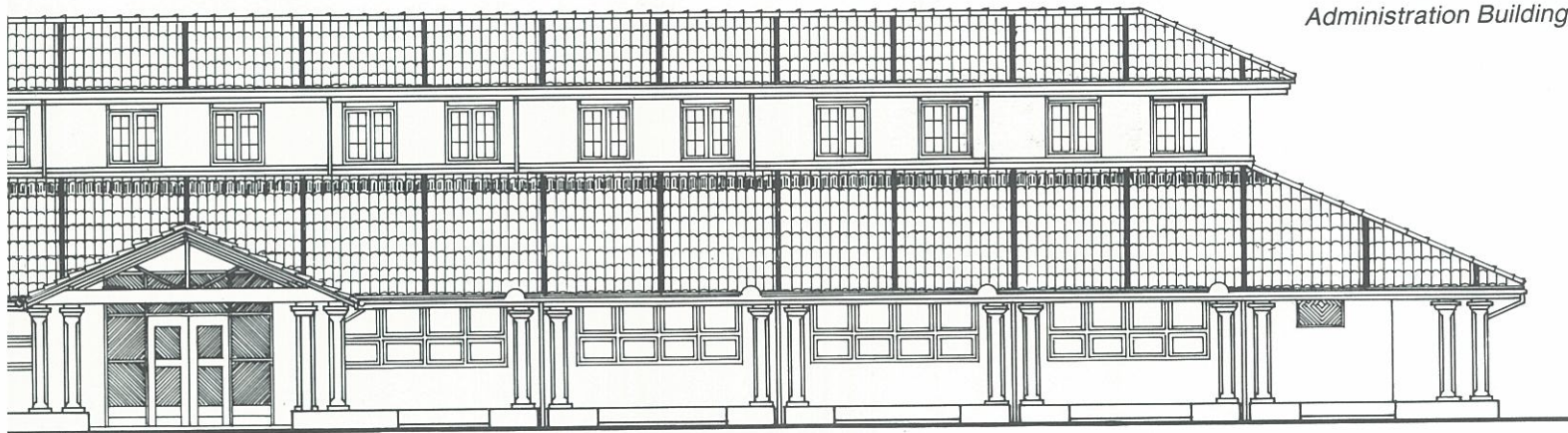
Buddhist Temple



Clock Tower



Administration Building



particular may come to affect the life and progress of the country.

The first is the tragic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority which is so entangled in a thousand years of rights and wrongs, that outsiders have no way of helping.

The second, though silent and nonviolent, may be as devastating as the first. However this is an area where outsiders can be of help: The tragic drain of experienced talent and skill to the well paying West and Middle East. This has now reached the point where a

great deal of the country's professional and technical middleclass, on which all progress totally depends, is abroad or planning to go abroad, and those few remaining avoid government service, which includes all development programs. This is largely due to the low (\$150 per month), government salaries.

Except for specialised and particularly experienced and sympathetic foreign experts, most of the Lankan professionals abroad are as good as – and being local, often more effective than – the foreign expert sent in as aid. For the cost of one foreign expert, one

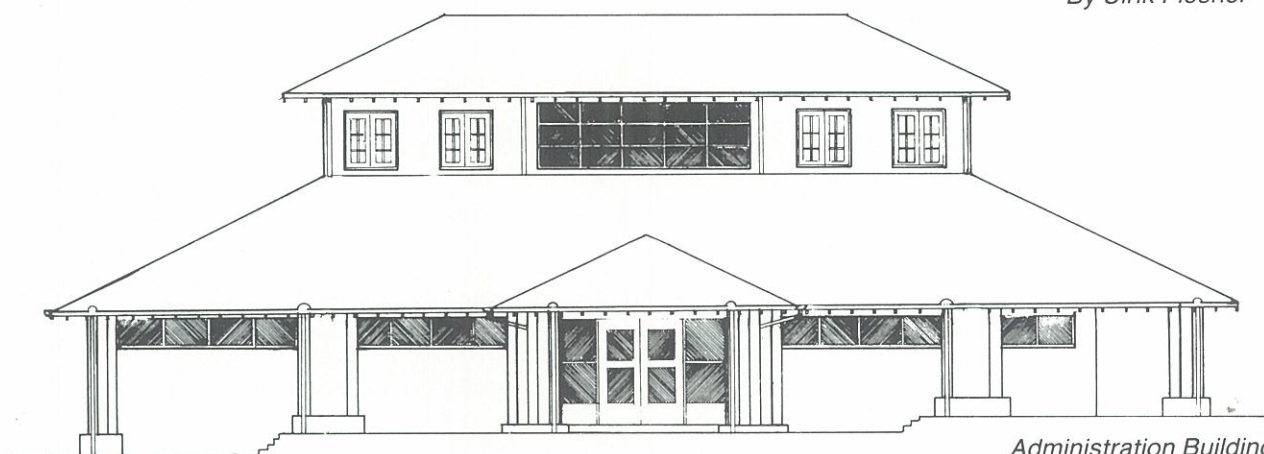
could bring home 10 native experts to government development jobs, in which they could accomplish wonders, not only with the projects at hand, but over a broad front, to long-term, self-propelled national development and, as a reliable competent class, to essential selfconfidence as a whole.

If the tricky mechanics of this were acceptable to donor countries, it would be worth as much as of the other development projects put together. It would be more effective per dollar and would strengthen the nation from within making it self reliant toward the ultimate goal of being self pro-

pelled – instead of, as now, being quietly demoralised by the absence of skills and embarrassed by foreign experts. It is the difference between investment and alms giving.

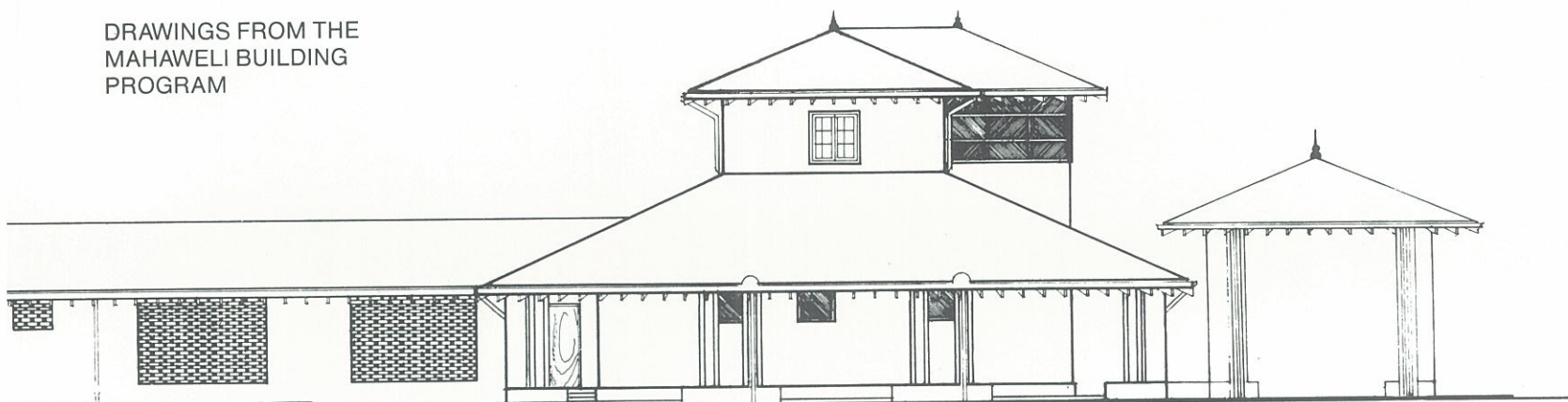
All in all, Sri Lanka was born a favoured country. With luck and charm and the right kind of help to self-help she will survive this generation of turmoil. She has all the ingredients to make a successful 21st century country: No vast city slums, a large healthy agricultural population, hydropower, no industrial burdens and a sense of humour and magic. I am only sorry that I will not be there to enjoy it. □

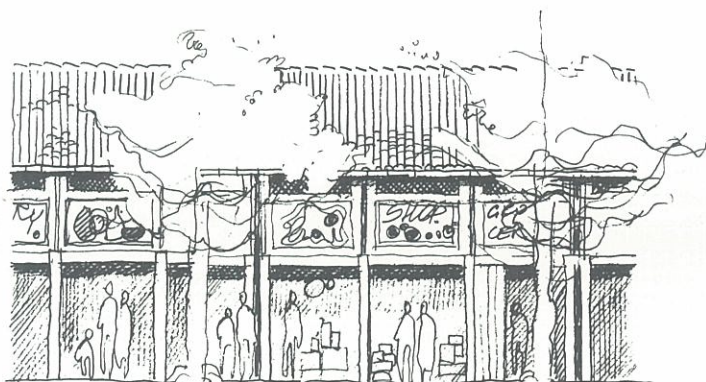
By Ulrik Plesner



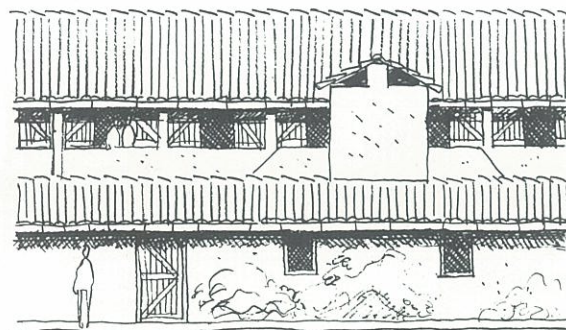
Administration Building

DRAWINGS FROM THE
MAHAWELI BUILDING
PROGRAM

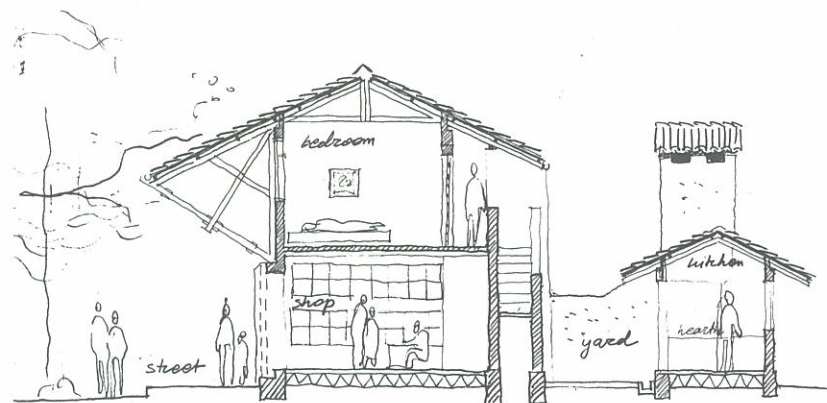




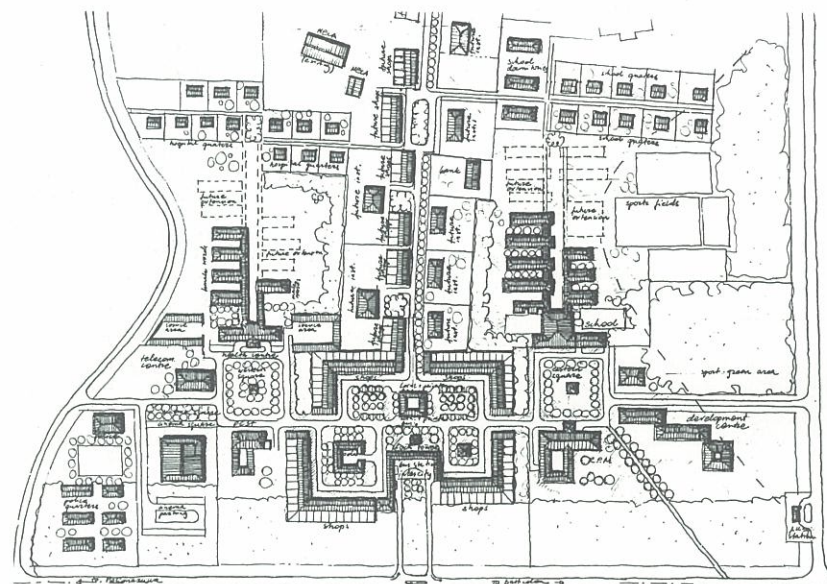
Shops, front elevation



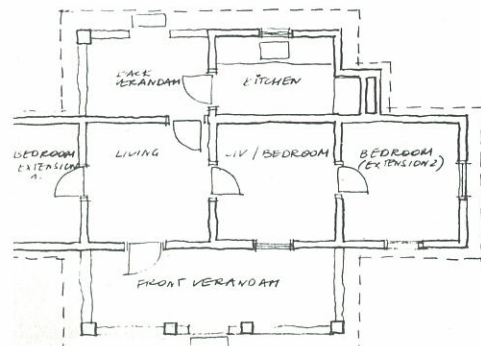
Shops, rear elevation



Shops, section



Low-cost housing



The Mahaweli Works was designed by Ulrik Plesner (Director of the Unit) and Dan Vodek Wajnman (architect maa) with the able assistance of a team of young Lankan architects from the Mahaweli Architectural Unit, part of MECA under the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka.

THE MAHAWELI BUILDING PROGRAM

by Ulrik Plesner

The Mahaweli Building Program consists of a large number of small ordinary buildings like shops, post offices, schools, hospitals and bus-stations, built by hundreds of small scale local contractors.

The buildings use the skills and traditional building materials of the area, such as brick and plaster, roof tiles, timber rafters and wooden doors and windows. Low-eaved tile roofs are employed to keep out the sun and driving rain while admitting the generally pleasant breezes. The buildings all grow out of existing building types and Lankan traditions, and form the nucleus of a dozen towns which will grow as centers for the new rural settlements.

The basic principles of these towns are:

1. Their centers are off the main road and have a fairly dense, urban character, with streets, squares and large shade trees. They will not become spread out, wild-west towns along the highway, which unfortunately is the natural self-starting growth pattern.

2. All the buildings necessary to establish the towns as functioning area centers for the surrounding farming population are built by the Mahaweli Authority, including the commercial spaces for lease or sale.

3. In order to give visual coherence and quality to the towns, as well as long lasting roofs on the houses. There is a unifying requirement that all buildings should have tiled

roofs. Buildings put up by private people or organizations must follow simple »Building Guidelines« which also include the tiled roof requirement.

4. In order to discourage the growth of shanties and poor quality illegal buildings, the tempting locations near the town centers are designed with little room to spare, and furthermore the area along the public highway which passes near the town center is allocated to autonomous institutions like the police-station, temple or school.

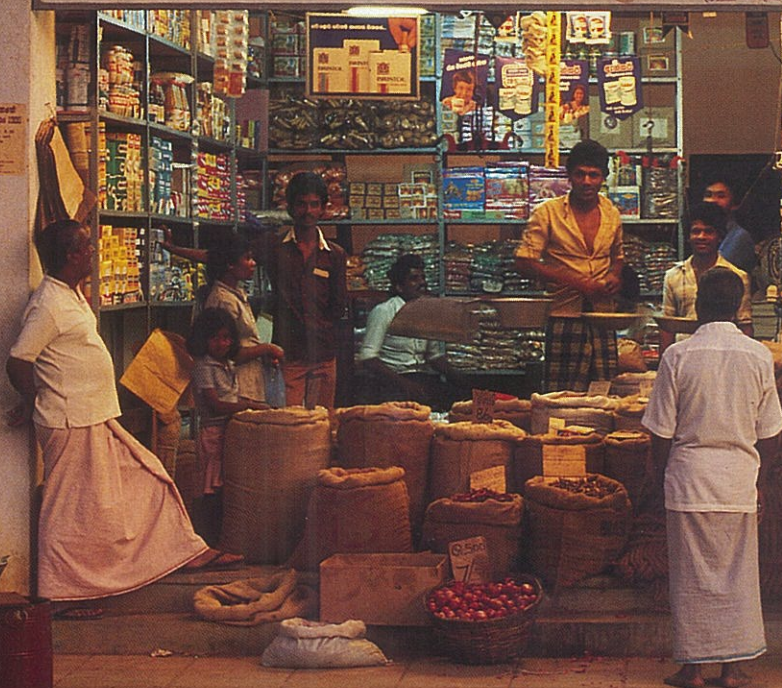
5. There is an extensive program for planting large, beautiful shade trees like Flamboyants and Rain Trees, in all town centers and along the highways.

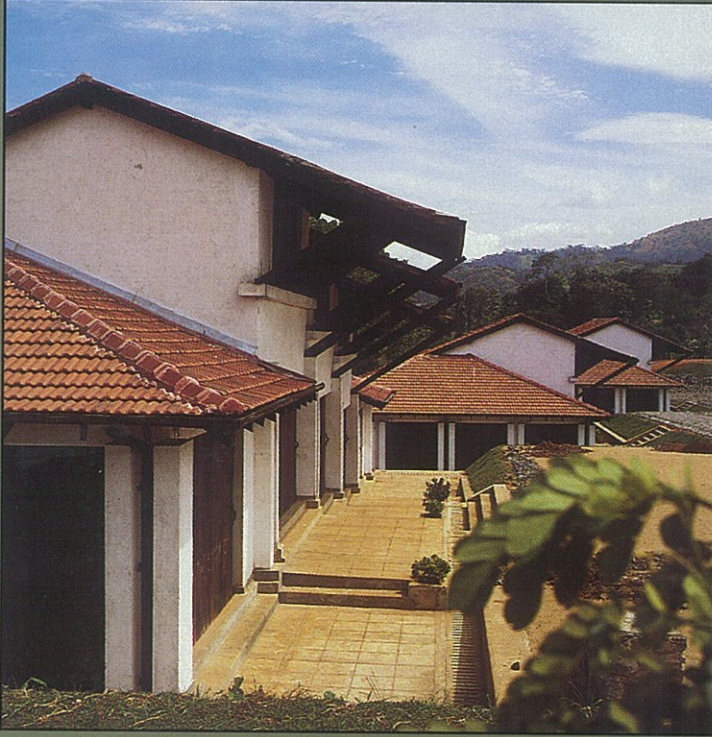
6. Low-cost, rammed earth-cement block construction for low-cost housing and general construction has been developed and established as technically and economically satisfactory.

The aim is to create good building habits, and good conditions for towns to continue and develop on their own.

We do not think that the buildings, as such, have a social content other than that which the eventual occupiers will give them. But we try to make the buildings and towns instantly acceptable by adhering to familiar, traditional patterns, by making both the interior of the buildings and the exterior public domain, shady, airy and comfortable, and by avoiding some of the worst enemies of a good town: through traffic, uncontrolled growth and shanty or slum areas. □

JAYAKODYSTORES.
ජයකොඩි සෙවර්ස්.
අංක.1, නුලිකරය - හේළදෙණිය







Post office



ULRIK PLESNER'S OWN HOUSE IN COLOMBO

In a home, one should be able to sit and talk where one feels like it, in the bedroom window, on the stairs, under a tree in the garden, not necessarily in a so-called sitting area. To sleep downstairs on the window sill or in a bed. To have something beautiful to look at when raising one's eyes from the table, or to see something exciting from the living room – water that moves, or a seat under a tree – both contain a promise, and in one's thoughts, the temptation to get up and go towards them.

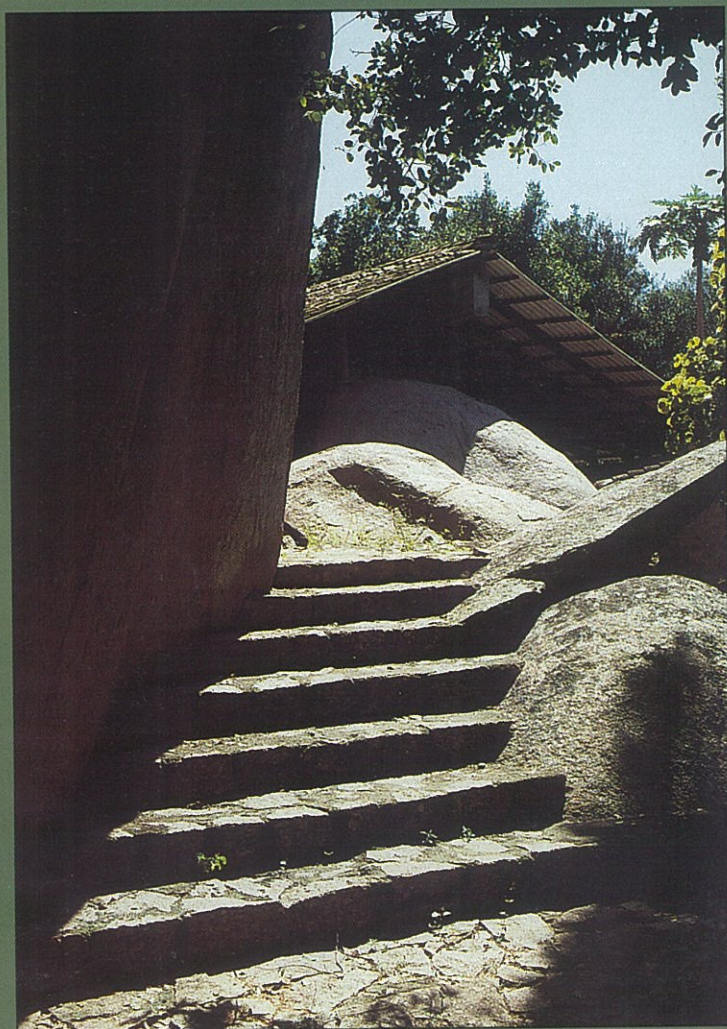
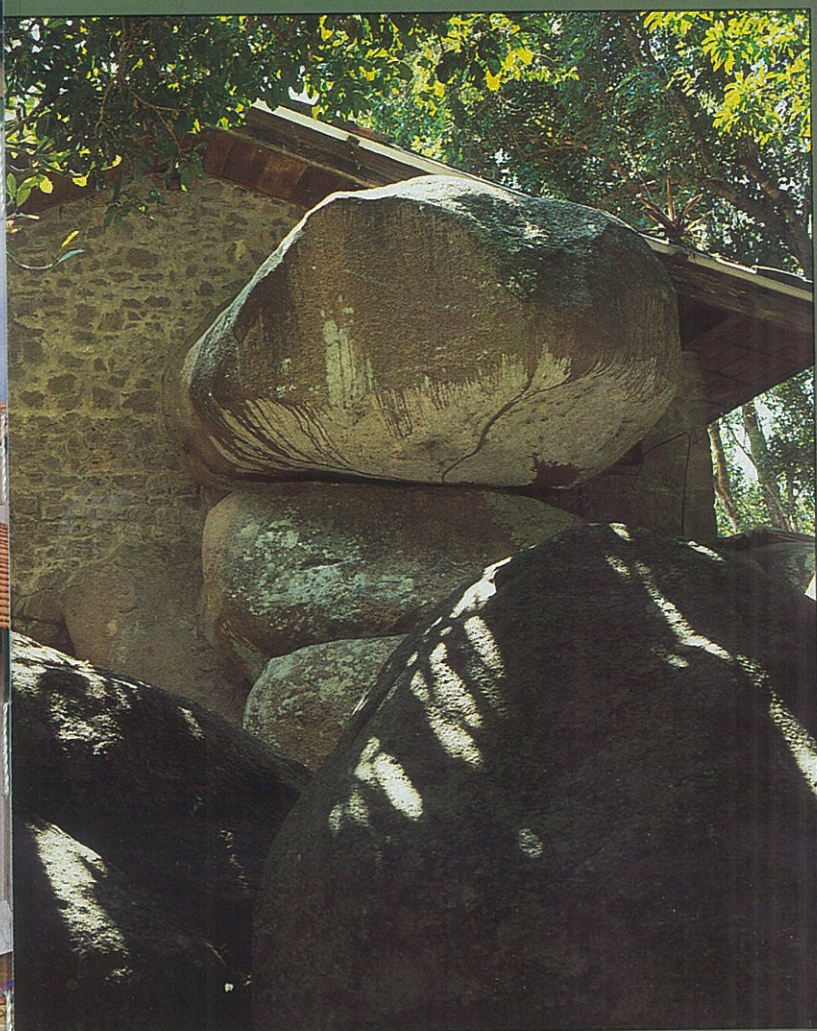
My own house was made so that one could not experience a total space – there was always the promise around the corner, the statue in a niche, the drama of going from the high open space into a dark air-conditioned low cave with niches and columns and statues in niches in columns, and the sound of water from a small pool that you could roll sideways into from bed. – One

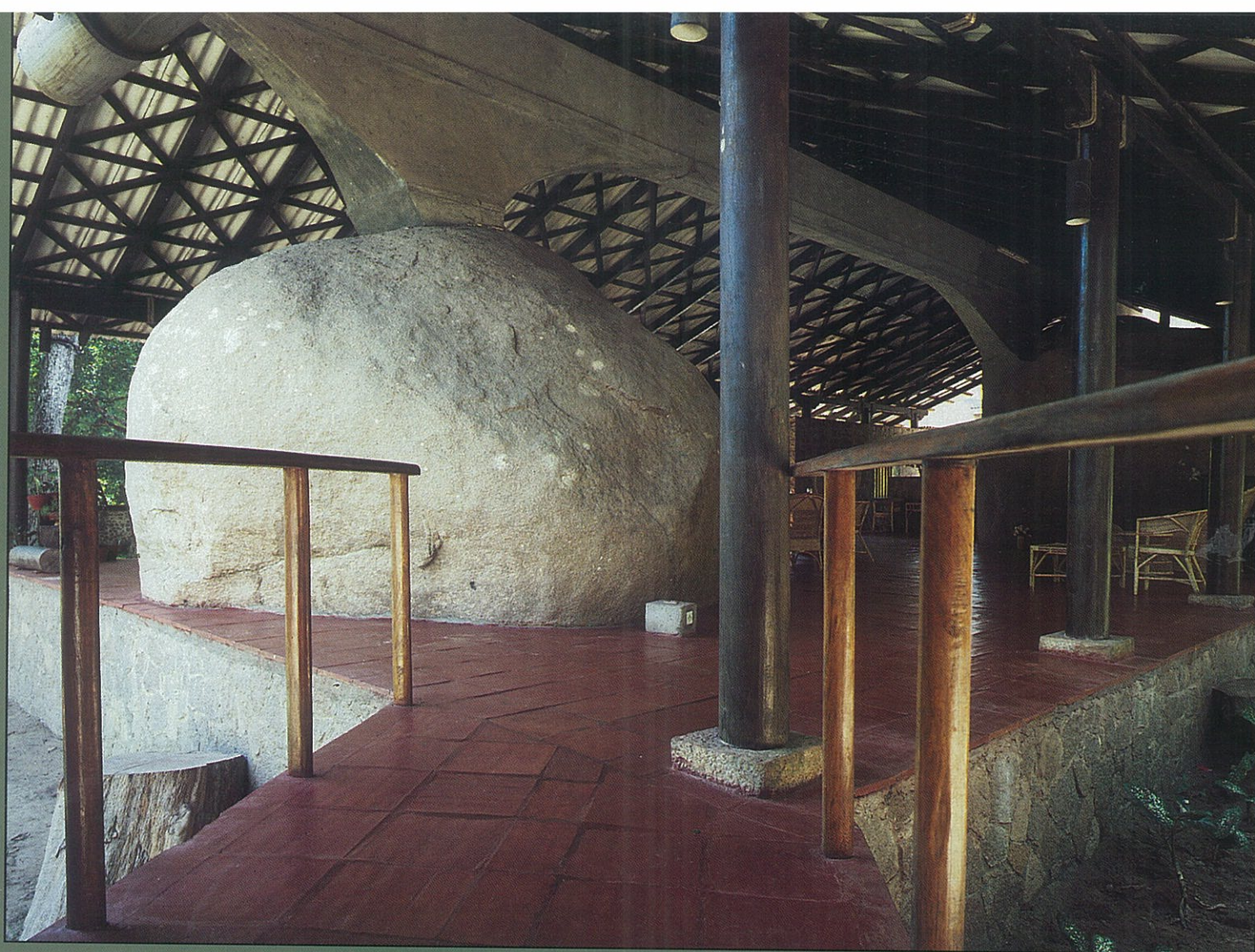
could sleep upstairs or downstairs or out in the garden. – The house is also a home for one's imagination – the senses are awakened, by being used, they get sharper.

The house is built of brick and concrete and is painted white. It has wide eaves to ward off the sun and rain, open sides to catch the breeze, and wooden trellis and a concrete pergola to keep out thieves. □

Photo: Per Nagel







the end of the third day, the house was mapped out in the air with white pieces of string seen against the boulders and leaves.

As the plantation is in a remote part of the country and sometimes cut off from the surroundings, the house was erected by local labor, unfamiliar with this kind of building activity. Once a month, I went up to the house to meet the foreman and discuss the work to be carried out during the coming month – this wall up to the height of 6 feet, the other wall extended to the boulder, etc. – simple instructions which were not to be contravened before the next visit.

On approaching the house one sees a long wall with a water tower on the right, the supervisor's office in the middle and the entrance on the left. One enters the house through a rock garden under a towering crag. The living room, which is open to the breeze, lies under a large roof, the ridge of which spans like a bridge between the three rock





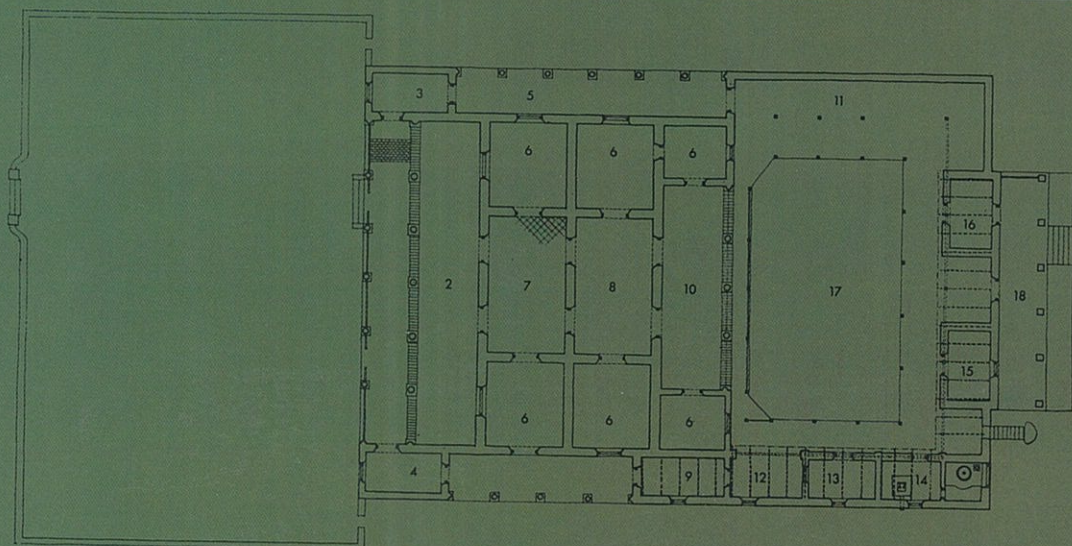
outcroppings. From the living room one crosses a bridge to the sleeping area which is closed off for security reasons. The breeze comes through the large, solid wood trellises. The supervisor's bedroom is built on a high rock, and is open at one end with a view over the jungle and a small interior courtyard. The bed consists of a mattress laid on a flat stone slab which was split, in prehistoric times, with soaked wooden wedges.

The wall is built of the same stone as the surrounding cliffs. The columns are polished, coconut palm trunks. The floors are terra cotta tiles. The roof and wall tops are barrel mission roofing tiles, which are common in these small villages. The roof has wooden beams of jungle timber covered with white painted corrugated asbestos roofing. On top of this are barrel mission roofing tiles which fit into the corrugations and insulate the asbestos roofing from overheating due to the sun, and at the same time improving their appearance. □





- 1 entrance court
- 2 reception veranda
- 3 office
- 4 servant attendance
- 5 veranda for local visitors
- 6 bedroom
- 7 ceremonial living room
- 8 ceremonial dining room
- 9 chapel shrine
- 10 family living and dining veranda
- 11 storage veranda
- 12 children's dining
- 13 bedroom
- 14 toilet
- 15 sleeping quarters for female servants
- 16 kitchen
- 17 "midula"
- 18 kitchen veranda



RESIDENCE FOR A FAMILY OF NOBILITY

Ekneligoda Wallawe is one of the old Sinhalese houses measured and drawn by Senanayke, Sansoni and Plesner.

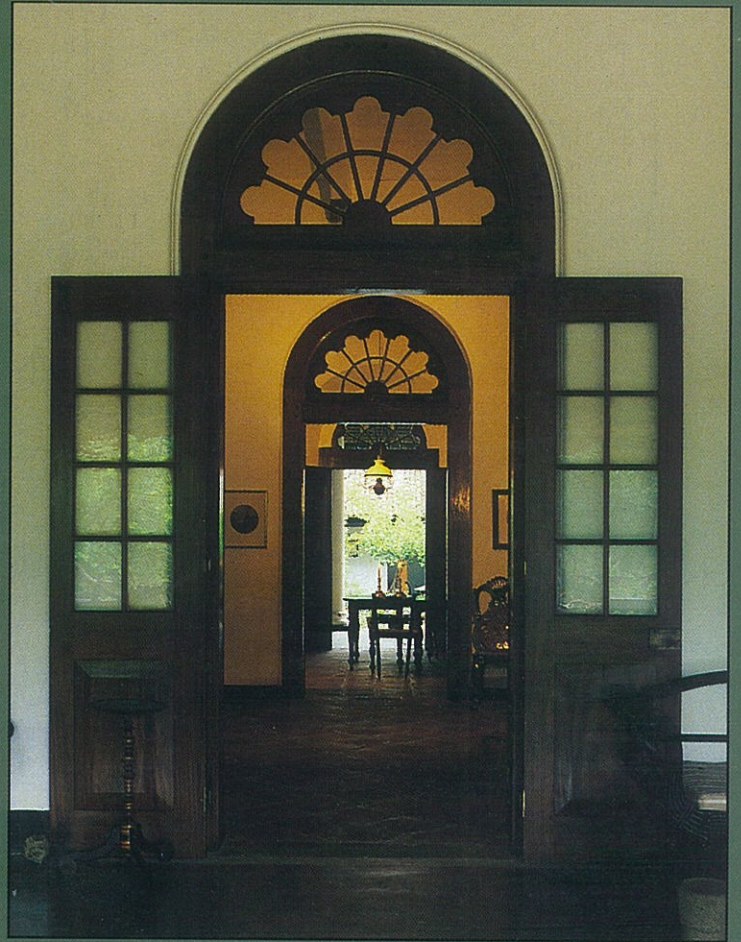
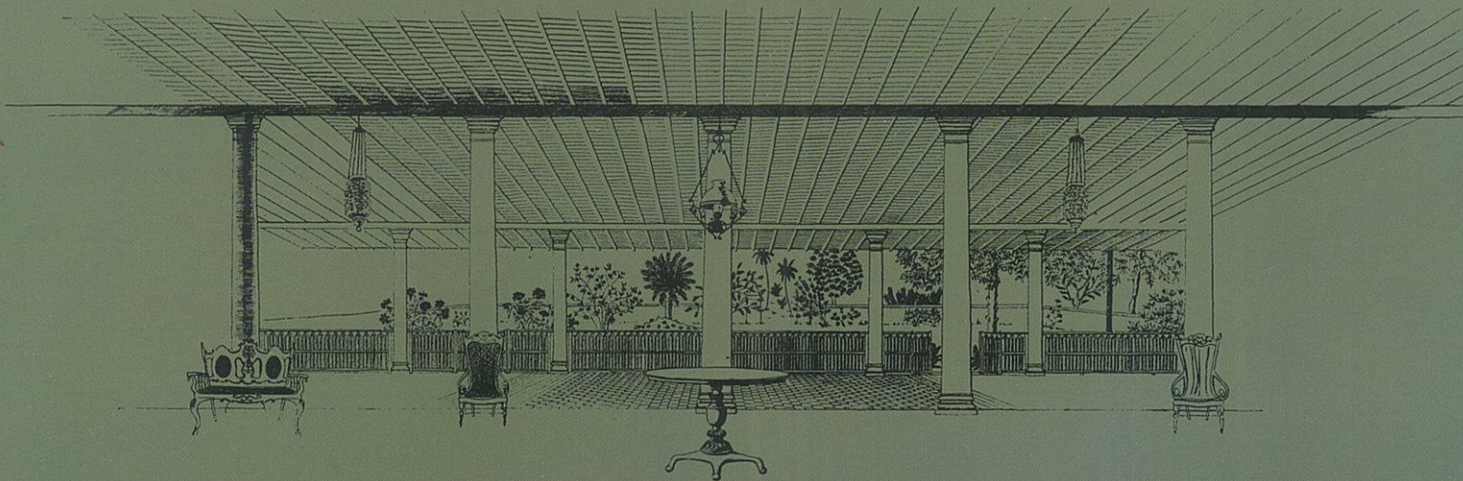


Photo: Per Nagel



reception veranda

Drawing by Barbara Sansoni



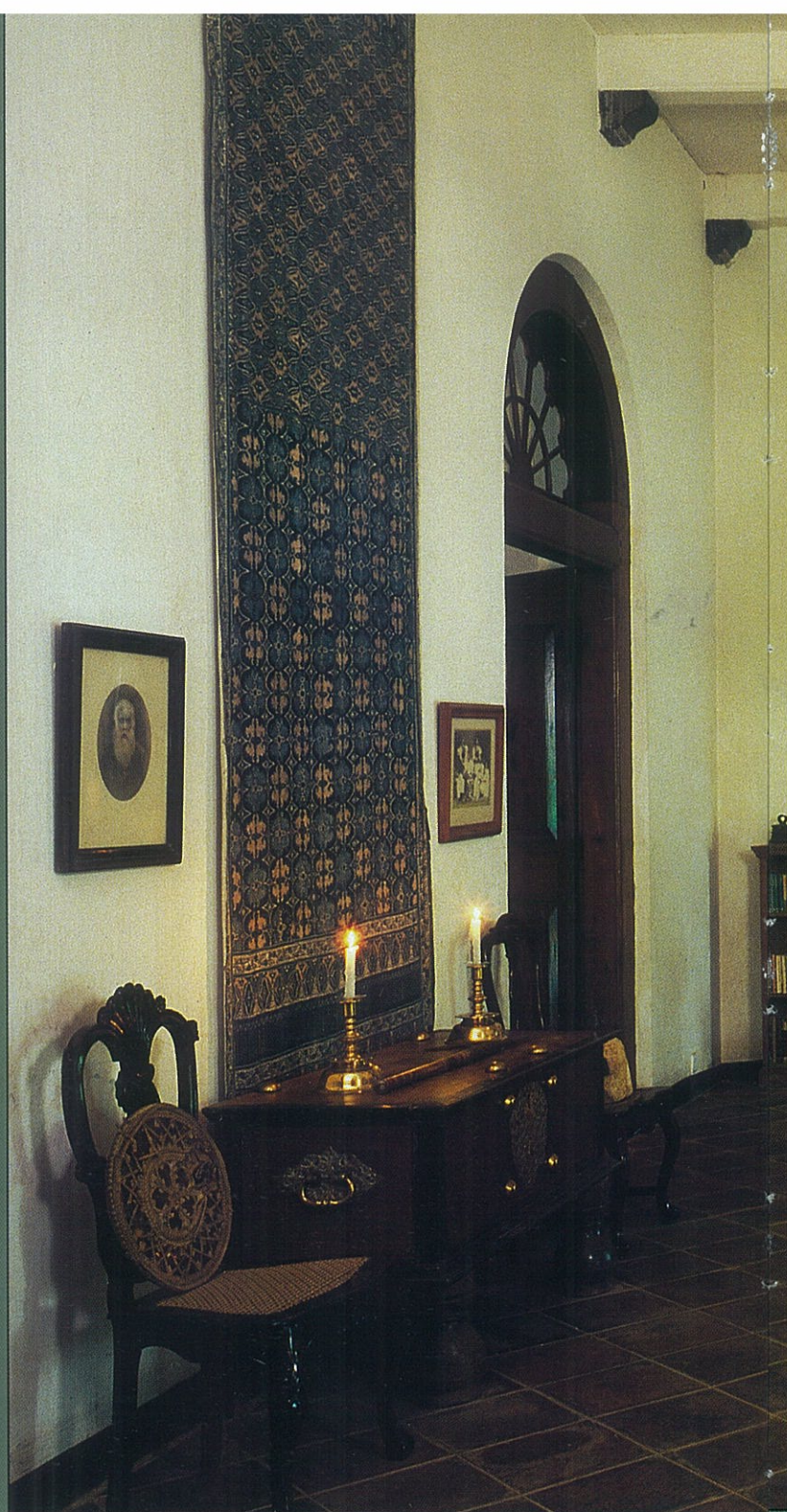
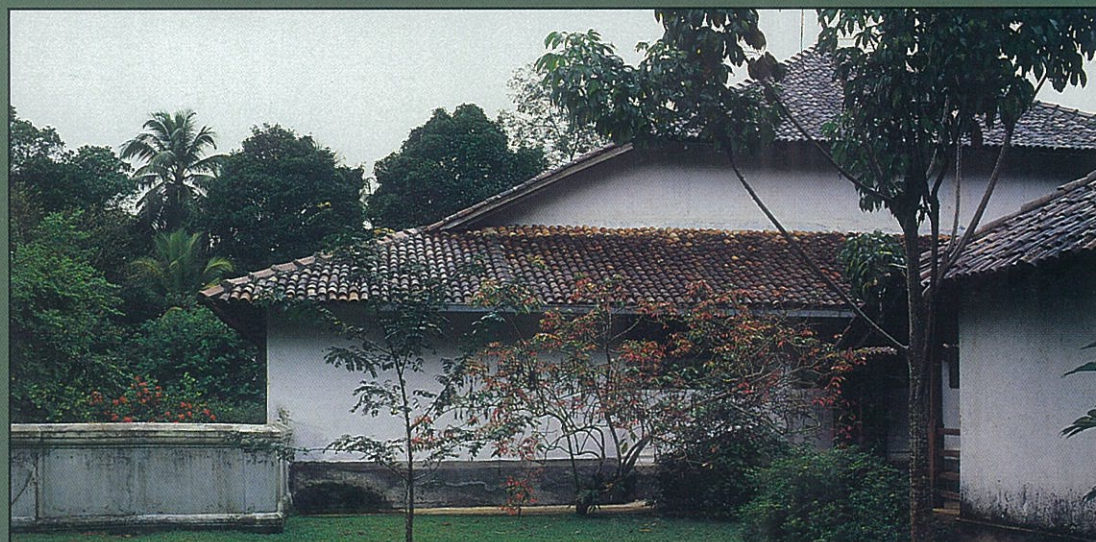
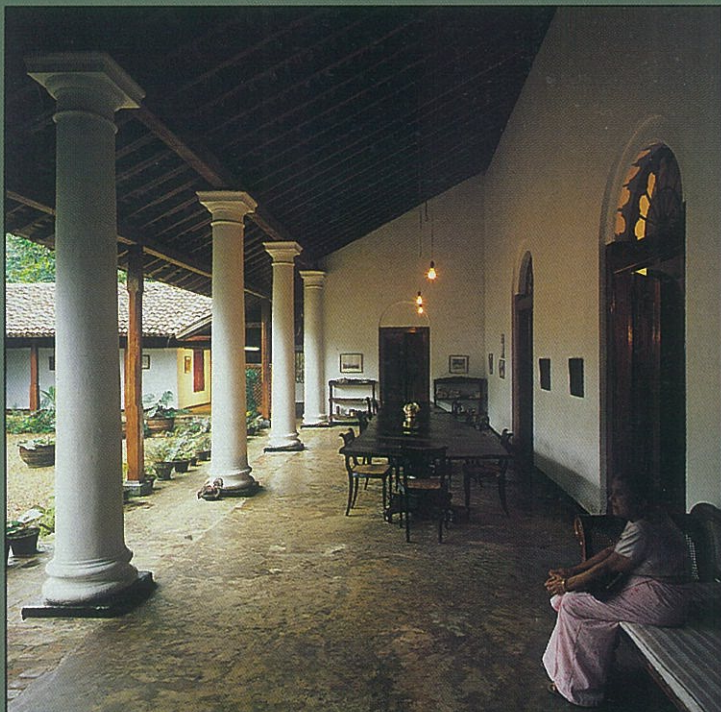


Inner courtyard, "midula"



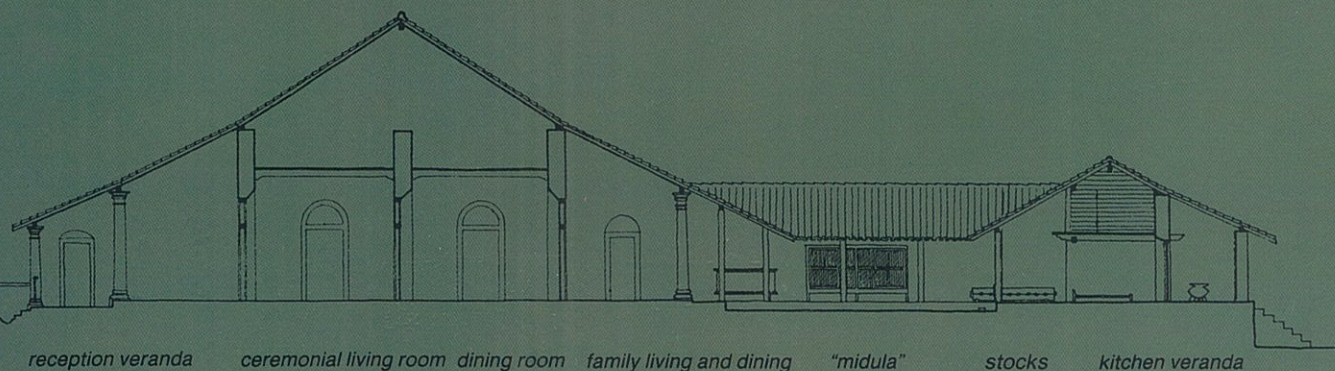
The roof of the house is of rural tiles like those used in Italy and Portugal. These became common in Ceylon after the arrival of the Portuguese, and are still widely used, being one of the coolest roof solutions one can find. This house is a fine example of a traditional Ceylonese plan. It belonged and still belongs to a family of the nobility. The house is a traditional Sinhalese house built in the nineteenth century on the founda-

tions of an earlier, similar house. Though formal in plan, it answers the needs of those who use it. In concept it closes out the surrounding world, opening inwardly to a garden courtyard called the "midula". Visitors were formally received and entertained on the front veranda; if high ranking, they were taken further into the house and, with even greater formality, entertained in the living room behind the veranda.



All the rooms and verandas used daily, are placed around the "midula". There one finds the family talking, children playing, and servants drying rice and working. An extremely democratic house-form.

It is wonderfully cool inside. When you arrive, tired from the jungle, it is liberating to enter the coolness under the low eaves and high ceiling. There is a constant breeze from the "midula" blowing through the verandas and rooms, and through the small windows and doors in the outer walls. □



reception veranda

ceremonial living room

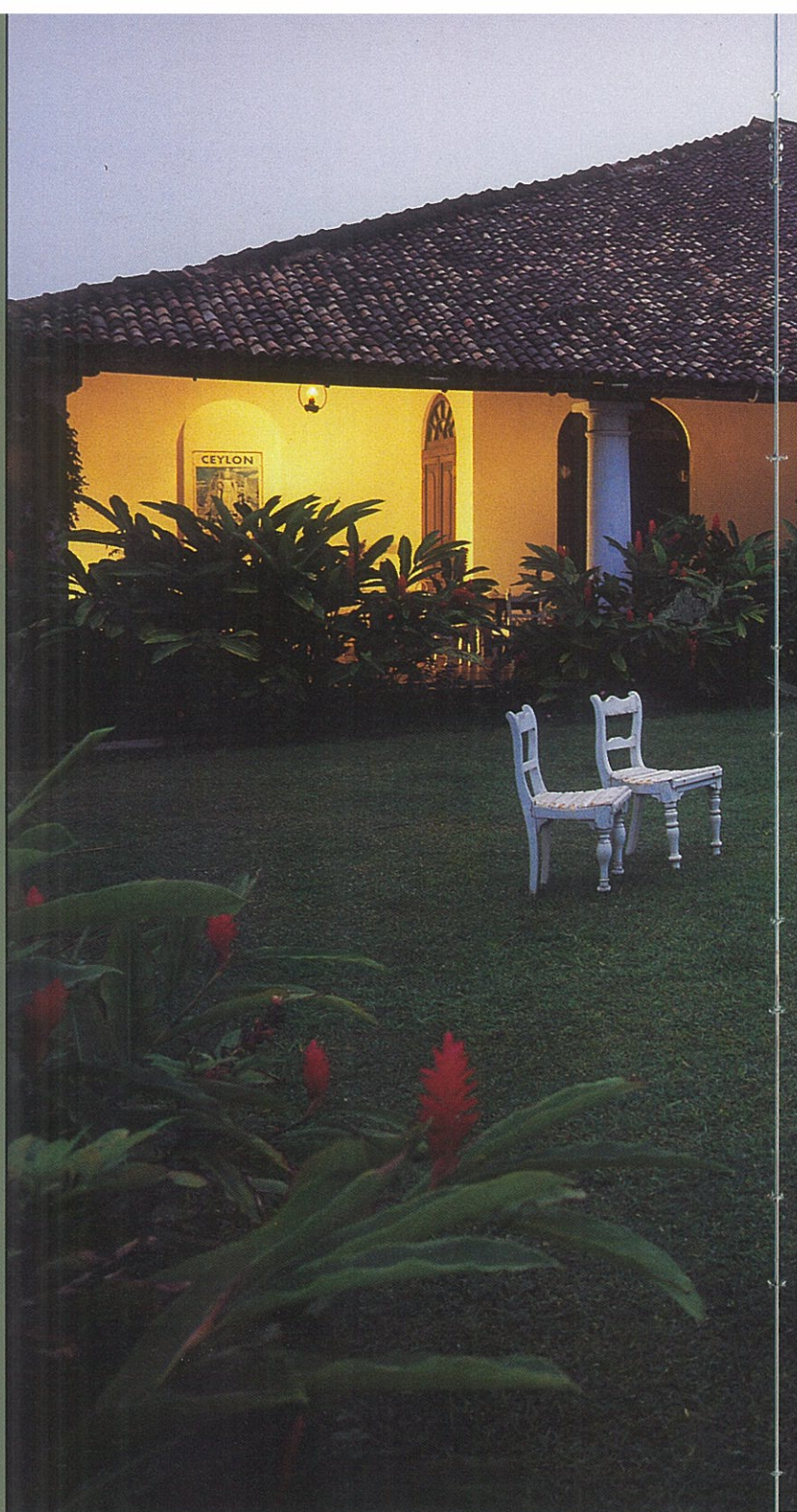
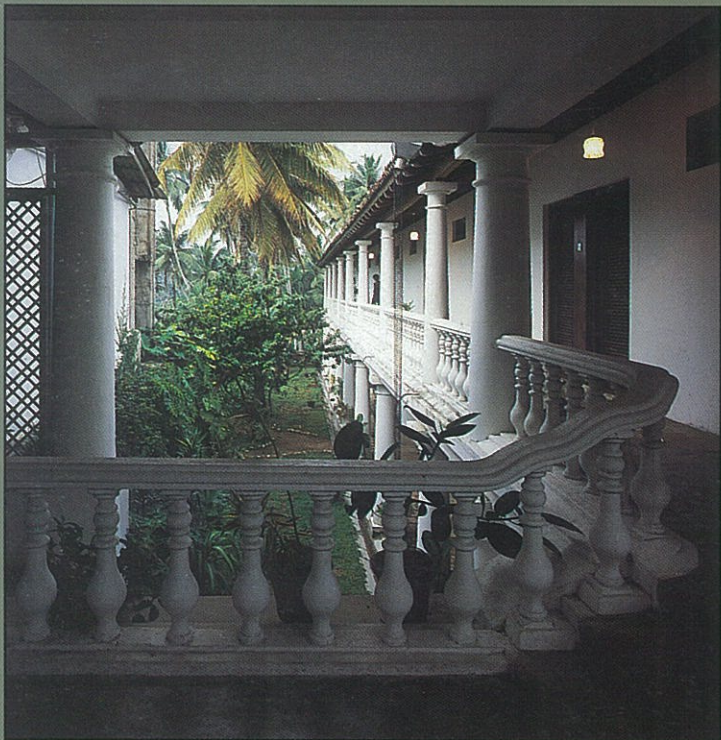
dining room

family living and dining

"midula"

stocks

kitchen veranda



The mansion a
sailor built by the
sea



VILLA MARINA

In the early 18th century the Dutch, who captured Galle (a fortified city in the south west coast of Sri Lanka) from the Portuguese, built a fortress on an island at the entrance of the Galle Bay and named it Cloosenberg. After Galle fell to the

British in 1786 this new port fell into disuse and ruin.

An agent of the English P&O (Pacific and Oriental Line) Captain Baily, came to Galle in 1859, saw this abandoned fort and immediately purchased it from the British Crown.

Baily built a beautiful residence with long, spacious verandas and

large airy rooms. The woodwork of the massive doors was of imported oak and expensive Viennese chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The furniture was of ebony and other expensive wood, and throughout the rising sun of the P&O emblem was displayed. In the dining room there are incredible coral decorations and the





garden is elaborately laid out with exotic plants. Balconies, terraces and summer pavillions were added to the beauty of the palatial mansion, which is said to resemble a luxury passenger liner.

Captain Baily named the house »Villa Marina«. It is now run as an exclusive tourist hotel with the name »Closenberg«. □