

Last Sunday, we wrote that the events of Weliveriya in the week past would soon be forgotten. We were right, but for another reason. We essayed the suspicion that the tendency of Sri Lankans to be (what we like to call) "resilient" – adaptable, untouched, forgetful – would help us all to gloss over the blood red sand of Rathupaswela. The egregious attack on the mosque in Grandpass this week speeded up the process of the greater mass of our populace becoming blissfully oblivious at best or apathetic at least.

Again, dark forces among the powers that be (who else can make it happen with such studied and insolent impunity?) – or the powers that want to be (who else may have a hidden, perverse, diabolical vested interest in the recent happenings?) – surprised us ordinary citizens with their ability to rattle-dazzle. Drama, this theatrical high-jinks by day or night: riots, mob attacks, panic stations, accusations and counteraccusations, conspiracy theories, and those hoary clichés like 'traitors' and 'international investigations' and 'death of democracy' have become standard jargon in the sociopolitical sphere of Sri Lanka today.

But lest this sound like a politically motivated piece or some foolishly ambitious attempt to analyze the un-analyze-able, let us hasten to assure you it is not. More ink than is necessary has been spilled in trying to get to the bottom of the rotten-apple bar-



## Of mosques and mice in masques

rel, to out the lurking big cat among the pigeons. We all have our favourite villains, those usual suspects, and myriad pet theories about the true state of affairs in our island-nation and the rationale, rhyme, and reason thereof. These self-indulgent pastimes of a petty half-hour hurt us all more than they help... helping as a sort of defence mechanism or safety valve for a polity still recovering from the physical as well as psychological wounds of protracted terror and war; but hurting our collective ability to rise from the ashes of our dead selves into a happy, healthy, humane, productive society once again.

Our intention in these brief weekend thoughts is not so much to comfort the disturbed, but to disturb the comfortable. To challenge average citizens not to abdicate their rights; to teach them alternative ways to express their reservations; to socialize the dwindling few into a realistic, reasonable, and responsible way of engaging in dissent. If this exercise can be safe, sound, and strategic enough to capture and convert the dormant imagination of the unreached masses of middle class citizens who would be protesting if they knew why, how, when, where, and which/whose, the interruption to their repose of this midnight hour of our nation would not be in vain. Only time will tell.



In the meantime, let us leave you with a triad of principles – tempered by sundry practical applications – in response to the emerging trends of this day and age. We do not expect a dreaded knock on the door at an unguarded hour, a summons to explain, or mysterious happenings to our instruments of communication. For these are still very much the privileges of free citizens in a civilized country that stands on its future image as much as its present reputation and past reality as one of the oldest democracies in the region.

**Worldview underlies words and works.** When armies open fire indiscriminately, we blame fallible men. When mosques are stoned, we point to movements working under cover of dark and secrecy. When dissenters, opposition, threats are systematically silenced, we admit the power of a ruthless machine; though we can hardly bring ourselves to admire it. When political leaders emerge from fiascos and imbrolios smelling of frangipani, we recognize that a monument is in the making. But underneath the thin veneer of sapience and sophistica-

tion, there is the bedrock of a man or a few unusual men with a similar mindset. The key to unlocking the men, movements, machines, and monuments in our way today – in the way of peace with justice – is to corner, challenge, critique, and question mindsets. Including our own.

Write a letter to the editor – or better still, the executive. Stand on the street corner. Rally at the Fort Railway Station like you did this week. Even if – and especially if – it will expose the truth about tactics like live ammo being used on unarmed crowds being the visible manifestation of thinking minds. Something dark this way comes. We need to shed more light on it. So question, question, question: the motivations and the machinations of strategic thinkers in hidden places.

**Ideas outlive ideologies.** History teaches us this lesson over and over again. Luddites are dead and gnashing their teeth in the outer darkness, but the light bulb lives on. Communism is interred with the bones of socialists once grown fat on the labour and the lostness of their fellow human beings, while the sharing of property for the common good is as old as Christianity – or even older – and will survive Capitalism's challenges. When surge after surge of nationalism, ultra-nationalism, and chauvinistic jingoistic militaristic patriotism has subsided, the subtle yet simple notions of one nation, indivisible unity based on love not law, Sri Lanka as a peaceful society un-policed by preening demagogues and petty tyrants, will still prevail.

**Dissent expands – not contracts – democratic space.** It really is a great pity – and a grand irony at that – that more despots and dictators have not stumbled upon this truth. If they had, the world would have been spared the likes of Tiananmen and Tahrir Squares.

## One foot in the past

**"All men, whatever their condition, who have done anything of merit," wrote Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), "if they be men of truth and good repute, should write the tale of their life with their own hand."**

Very few practising architects have taken the advice of this Renaissance artist and autobiographies by architects are very rare, especially by those who practised the profession in Sri Lanka. Therefore, 'IN SITU' probably is the only one of its kind.

The title of this memoir, 'IN SITU', which Ulrik Plesner has aptly chosen was a current and popular phrase among architects, engineers and contractors in the 1950s and 1960s and describes the years he was in Sri Lanka. The etymology of the phrase dating to 1740 is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'in its original place' or 'in position'.

Often, memoirs and autobiographies are written for various personal and public reasons but this book seems to have been written by Plesner to re-affirm the role played by him as an architect in those eventful years in Sri Lanka.

In a narrative written simply in unadorned style, Plesner sets out six significant aspects and contributions he has made:

\* His collaboration with

Geoffrey Bawa, which proved crucial to the building projects, carried out jointly at the firm Edwards Reid & Begg architects, between 1958 and 1967.

\* In introducing with Bawa, an approach to architectural design of domestic buildings that was undeniably new to this country. Traditional design elements associated with monsoon South Asia such as internal courtyards, roofs with wide eaves, colonnaded verandas, trellis windows, platforms and masonry furniture, murals on walls were integrated and adapted to architectural designs.

\* Collaborating with artists and sculptors to form an integrated solution for his buildings, with an example of such a successful joint effort being Plesner's suggestion to Australian painter Donald Friend to create sculptural forms in a utility material like aluminium.

\* The documentation of ancient buildings of Sri Lanka's rich building heritage, thereby highlighting its relevance to contemporary building techniques. By re-identifying the vernacular, Plesner injected a whole younger generation of designers with his enthusiasm and passion.

\* A novel and practical approach to teaching design at the School of Architecture at Katubedde, established in 1960.

\* The overall planning of the townships of the Mahaweli



Irrigation Project, which as its Director he designed and built with consummate dedication, passion and skill (1980-1987).

The book, however offers much more than a mere defence of his contribution to Sri Lankan architecture. Plesner's narrative transports the reader to five separate countries, where he grew up, laboured and lived – Scotland, Denmark, Sri Lanka, England and Israel. As the sub-title of the book makes eminently clear it is primarily an architectural memoir focusing on Sri Lanka, opening with events here, and not unlike a symphony, ending here as well. His narrative, recorded half a century later, chronicles events and personalities he encountered from 1957 to 1967 and again when he returned in 1980-87.

Whole pages, almost a quarter of the book, are literally "plastered" with rare and extraordinarily evocative, stunning, black and white images of buildings – some under construction and others complete with exquisite interiors, landscapes, portraits of people and personalities. Some have never been seen before by the public. Designs of buildings with layout plans, and other drawings support the text.

The images are by Plesner and eminent cameraman Nihal Fernando. According to the blurb, "the photographs were taken over 50 years ago and most of the buildings have been so changed by life they cannot be re-photographed".

The book offers an account of Plesner's life. Born in Florence, Italy, in 1930, he had an idyllic childhood, later moving to Scotland and Denmark, growing up in a cosmopolitan European milieu, surrounded by family and friends, many of whom were renowned artists and architects.

Plesner was from a distinguished family of architects, with his grand-uncle also named Ulrik Plesner and his stepfather Karre Klint being well-recognized members of the profession. Klint is best known in Denmark as the architect of the arresting and monumental Grundvig's church (Copenhagen, completed 1940).

In Denmark, Klint is a household name in furniture and synonymous with modern light fittings.

Young Plesner studied at the elite architecture school, the Royal Danish Academy (RDA), founded in 1741, Copenhagen, where solid, functional teaching and training techniques were combined with the best building traditions of the Danish welfare society.

The RDA offered more than most architecture schools to those learning the craft of building. A majori-

ty of students who enrolled here were skilled enough to be professional carpenters, while others excelled as bricklayers or plumbers.

Plesner took to working at a construction site during the four-month summer vacation in 1949-50 and the skills he acquired contributed to making him pay attention to detail, which Plesner believed was the bedrock of good functional architecture.

He also worked part-time at the National Museum, Copenhagen, on a project documenting old castles and grand residences, which further honed his appreciation and respect for traditional buildings and techniques.

While most of his contemporaries in the RDA from where he graduated in 1955, went in search of careers to Scandinavia, Plesner looked East. Delving into Buddhist philosophy may have propelled him to take part in an architectural competition mooted by the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964) and the Lalith Kala Academy in New Delhi to commemorate 2,500 years of the founding of Buddhism. His unique shell-domed entry earned him third place and whetted his appetite to journey to the sub-continent.

The next decade, 1958-67, proved crucial for him as well as Sri Lanka. The post-independence decade prior to Plesner's arrival saw the influx of a dozen or more architects trained in England who sought to qualify as members of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

Post-independence Sri Lanka, with its multi-cultural heritage faced a host of problems, which were entrenched in the economic, political and social structure. But independence offered the opportunity for Sri Lanka to choose its own destiny and identity after enduring four centuries of European rule, which although had had a withering impact on the development of the traditional crafts, had also added another layer of cultural heritage.

The newly-emerging middle class, shackled with an education and upbringing largely based on European ideals and norms, found Sri Lanka to be alien. They could be aptly described in the words of Macaulay (although the comment referred to Indians): "A class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect."

This in essence was the architectural landscape in which Plesner found himself in, when he stepped off the Italian liner M/Victoria in Colombo harbour in January 1957

### Book facts

**IN SITU, an architectural memoir from Sri Lanka by Ulrik Plesner. Illustrations by Ulrik Plesner. Photographic images by Ulrik Plesner, Nihal Fernando and Dominic Sansoni. Reviewed by Ismeth Raheem. The book priced Rs. 4, 800 is available at Barefoot.**

to be greeted by architect Minette de Silva in an open boat which ferried him back to the terminal. Colombo in the late 1950s was a backwater, where serious cultural events were few.

After a fruitful year working with Minette de Silva, he linked up with Geoffrey Bawa in 1958, another of those architects who had returned from England. Working alongside two of the most influential architects of post-independence Sri Lanka gave Plesner an extraordinary window of opportunity to widen his horizons.

As Plesner must have been aware during his years of growing up in Europe, the 20th century was the Golden Age of the Masters of modern architecture and the plastic arts, led by the experimental works of Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. They issued lengthy personal manifestos on architectural design, enthusiastically supported in print by their unquestioning acolytes.

Plesner was guarded and wary of the architectural press and media's uncritical praise extolling the virtues of the new architecture and the work of great architects for their own sake.

In the course of his travels, even though he came face to face with the work of major architects, more often than not he found them monumental, sterile and lacking charm. It made him despondent. Several of the icons and idols of modern architecture on the high altar have been trashed and severely castigated in his book. His trenchant criticism of the works and designs (built and unbuilt) by Le Corbusier (at Chandigarh), Louis Khan (Tel Aviv) and Arne Jacobsen (Islamabad) makes depressing but fascinating reading.

It is remarkable and almost inconceivable that when Jorn Utzon, one of the leading architects of the 20th century, won the worldwide design competition for the Sydney Opera House and offered Plesner the post of project supervisor in 1957, he turned it down. His previous experience of designing shell structures and

their limitations had taught him to be circumspect. Plesner had adverse and critical comments to make on Utzon's approach to the understanding of shell structures and believed that this was the single fundamental issue that hindered the progress of construction of the Opera House and triggered an ever-soaring cost culminating in Utzon abandoning the work.

The major lacuna and omission in the narrative, however, are the source of Plesner's inspiration. Did no architect influence his work? Or was it that he sourced his ideal models synthesized from the natural environment or the historic man-made environment like ancient buildings?

Elsewhere in tropical countries of the old as well as the new world, attempts were being made to come to terms with building solutions incorporating ecological, cultural and social elements that were similar to ours.

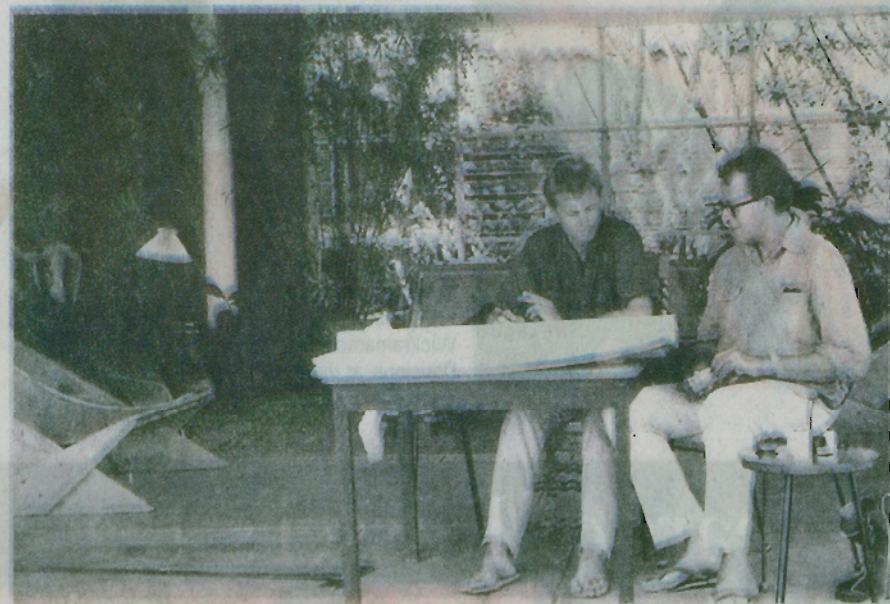
The buildings (in the late 1940s and early 50s) of Mexican architect Luis Barragan who often cited Le Corbusier as one of his main sources of inspiration were eye-openers to us all who worked at Bawa's and Plesner's office.

Barragan was an influential and inspirational source for the work of Sri Lankan architects of the 1960s and 70s.

Several design elements such as masonry seats, tables, beds, built-up ponds and pools, large oversized concrete walls, pergolas and other details echo in the collaborative work of Plesner and Bawa. Did Barragan's design solutions impact on their work?

Interestingly, an architectural landmark, the Baur's Flats and Office Complex, Fort, built in 1941, was recognized as one of the radical designs in the South Asian region. The apartments with their unique double height living spaces and great wealth of detail were a source of inspiration to a generation of architects from the 1960s. Plesner who was well acquainted with the Baur's building complex, resided there in 1958 and also undertook an office restoration project in 1960.

The spatial manipulation of the living spaces are echoed in three houses Plesner designed for Barbara Sansoni's annexe and the residences of Ian and Gun Peiris and Maurice and Malkanthi Perera. Were these ideas borrowed or redefined? Or have they no connection at all? These are some of the intriguing questions that need to be answered both by Plesner and others who are engaged in debates on the Sri Lankan architectural style.



At work: Plesner and Bawa



Plesner with his antique Fiat in Kandy