

THE HINDU

The pirate and the prince

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The Don Van De Pol House in Kochi, Kerala, landscaped and designed by Wijaya's firm P.T. Wijaya Tribwana International. Photo: ptwijaya.com | ptwijaya.com



The Asian Gardens in Naples Botanical Garden, Florida, U.S., landscaped and designed by Wijaya's firm P.T. Wijaya Tribwana International. Photo: ptwijaya.com | ptwijaya.com



Made Wijaya, Bali's maverick architect. Photo: Facebook.com

Made Wijaya, agent provocateur and landscape artist supreme, died last month. And we can be sure he went raging into that good night

Geoffrey Bawa, architect and landscape designer, was a legend in Sri Lanka. Bawa's contribution to the creation of a language of architecture has been described as "the single greatest input on independent Sri Lanka's landscape".

Made Wijaya, agent provocateur and creator of 'Design Bali Modern', was something of a pirate in comparison. If Bawa was the high priest of a classical style, Wijaya was a clown prince. He delighted in mocking the pretensions of what passed for international style in design and architecture that could be mindlessly copied and rubber-stamped on different continents.

What makes them so arresting is that despite the differences in age, style and temperament, both Geoffrey Manning Bawa (July 23, 1919, to May 27, 2003) and Wijaya (born Michael Richard White in Sydney; March 23, 1953, to August 29, 2016) were travellers on the same quest. They tried to save their island paradises from the onslaught of mass tourism by reinventing the past and making it relevant to the present. In its simplest form, it could be called a search for beauty. They lived on two uniquely favoured islands separated by the Indian Ocean. It's significant that both Sri Lanka and Bali were islands once dominated by the Dutch. Many of their projects share the high-pitched all-embracing roof of the Dutch colonists. They worked with the hard tropical wood used to make furniture in colonial homes and offices, ships, churches and monasteries by the Dutch and the Portuguese — a task which demanded a rare degree of design inputs and challenged the local craftsmen and their colonial clients. This artisanal *jugalbandi* is what attracted both Bawa and Wijaya in their search for relevant design. Both honed their vision by designing for hotels. Is this why so much of their work is accessible? Bawa's Kandalama Hotel, his last masterpiece, is built into a rock-face on the original site of a monastery for Buddhist monks, with stretches of lakes and forests almost hiding it, and cannot be consumed as an artefact. It can only be experienced, as it slowly reveals different facets of itself.

Bawa came from an extraordinary mixed lineage. On his father's side there were Arab and British ancestors; on his mother's side, Dutch Burgher and Sinhalese. He attributes his love for gardening to his older brother Bevis. He lived in monastic simplicity at his beloved retreat at 'Lunuganga' where visitors can still experience some of the restrained splendour of his style. It was not just a home, but also an architectural laboratory. Bawa and his acolytes experimented with and adapted the principles of modern design to reflect the age-old craft traditions that had evolved in the tropical landscape.

According to his own myth, Wijaya started life as Michael White, a 20-something Australian student of architecture who jumped off a ship when it approached the southern tip of the Indonesian island of Bali and swam across the waves to claim the island as his own. The year was 1973. He was both an adopted son of the fabled island and the guardian spirit of Balinese traditions, culture and architecture. He taught

English, acted as tennis coach and tourist guide, took photographs and made friends with the beautiful celebrities for whom Bali was the paradise island at the edge of the ocean.

In the process, he became a celebrity himself, a designer who boasted that at the height of his popularity, he had a hundred projects worldwide being processed by his “garden commandos” as he called his assistants. Some of these projects like the fish-shaped garden greens at the Taj Wellington Mews were in India. He boasted that some of his best clients were Indian. Indians loved romance, colour and, given our fondness for Bollywood-style extravaganza, he argued that we dared to be different.

What Wijaya hated was conformity. As he once confessed, he particularly loathed the proliferation of stone Buddha statues meditating in a pool of water. “They are thrown around like inflated stone cushions!” he raged. He attacked the mindless “environmental vandalism” in his early columns in the local paper that now forms part of the compendium *The Best of Stranger in Paradise - Bali 1996-2008*.

He was good at raging. He said in one column, “Architects from Melbourne to Morocco — and one might not be mistaken in thinking it was just one architect, so similar are their designs — are taking over the landscape with their trademark expansiveness, reducing the once-loved home garden to a draught-board-driven exercise in planting by numbers. Garden terraces are looking like office works catalogues.”

The year 1973 was also significant for Bawa. At Lunuganga, visitors may notice a carved urn with two faces on each side at the head of a flight of steps. This was by an Australian artist named Donald Friend who invited Bawa to spend time in Bali. While working on a project in Batujimbar on the southern tip of Bali, the spot where Wijaya climbed out of the waves, Bawa immersed himself in absorbing the local culture, architecture and rich craft traditions. Bali opened Bawa’s Europeanised sensibilities and classical training to a more subtle system of beliefs in the powers of the earth. Some of his later projects — buildings floating on water, or situated at the end of a long tunnel of green, or filled with light and shadows — reflect the lessons he learnt in Bali.

The Balinese adapted the key elements of Hinduism that came to them from overseas by incorporating them into their own animist beliefs. With a quasi-dormant volcano in the north of the island and a fragile ecosystem kept in place by a strictly controlled system of terrace

cultivation allowing the flow of rain-fed streams, they needed to propitiate numerous spirits. Not only are ancient trees revered and wrapped around in sarongs, but every day, women plait palm frond trays and fill them with offerings of flowers, fruit and incense sticks and leave these *canang sari* on doorsteps, in hotels and on bank counters to feed the spirits.

In the morning, long lines of sarong-clad women carrying exquisitely decorated trays of fruit and flowers called *Banten Tegeh* on their heads as offering may be seen walking up to a hill temple. Similarly, the exquisite water temple to Shiva, Pura Bratan, which rises like a Himalayan pine at the edge of a lake, stands like a woman carrying a towering *Banten Tegeh* to the mountain gods. Did Bawa stand here and absorb the image of a building reflected in a pool of clear water?

As Wijaya was to record in his diaries, rituals served the purpose of enhancing the Balinese connection to the earth and their ancestors through design. This was true whether in the weaving of batik cloths, the making of daily utensils, the personal adornment of both men and women, the donning of masks and puppets for night-long dance performances, or the elaborate funeral processions that were part of the daily life of the villagers.

“There is a certain popular belief amongst the Balinese,” wrote Wijaya in his diaries. “It’s called the *Desa, Kala, Patra* (juggling place, time, situation), and it has allowed the Balinese culture to move unscathed into the 21st century. *Desa, Kala, Patra* is an ancient Hindu tenet; where balanced harmony and flexibility are as important as a strict adherence to the religion’s code.”

Bawa and Wijaya, two great spirits, both juggled their ideas through time and space and strongly embedded their footprints in paradise.

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