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Sequential Vision and Disorienting Experience of Garden Space in Asian Context: Comparative Analysis Based on the Residence of Ena de Silva and Xixi Villa

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Abstract: The blending of Eastern and Western cultures brought about by colonization was an important reason for the changes in Asian architecture in the 20th century. The passive input of Western design concepts into the local tradition caused a long swing in the design direction. The process of regionalism and global modernism from opposition to gradual integration can be found in the development of a series of Asian architectures. Based on the two architectural works of Geoffrey Bawa and Ge Ruliang, this paper discusses how Asian architects make in-depth regional expressions through garden space.

Keywords: Critical regionalism; Asian architecture; Garden space; Cultural comparison

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1. Introduction

Geoffrey Bawa (1919-2003), one of the most important Asian architects of the 20th century, is often characterized as a romantic vernacularist and a representative of critical regionalism due to the complex overlay of universality and locality in his works. Similarly, from the 1950s onwards, Chinese architects also began to explore regionalism. This paper compares Bawa's Ena de Silva House with Mr. Ge Ruliang's Xixi Villa to discuss the expression of profound culture and living spirit in the relationship between architecture and garden space as Asian architects.

2. A brief description of Sri Lanka and its architecture

As an island nation in the Indian Ocean a few degrees from the equator, Sri Lanka's only connection to the mainland is the Palk Strait in southeast India, and as a result, the Sinhalese make up three-quarters of the population. Despite its distance from the world's centers of power and influence, Sri Lanka has been home to immigrants from all over the world due to the Indian Ocean, allowing various architectural styles to converge here.

The island of Sri Lanka is divided into a dry zone in the northeast and a wet zone in the southwest by the action of the mountains and the Indian Ocean monsoon. With the decline of Polonnaruwa in the 13th century, the center of power gradually shifted southward and moved to the new capital of Gampola in the second half of the 14th century. The shift in the climatic zone and the mountainous terrain also forced the traditional Sinhala classical style to gradually shift to a more vernacular and adaptable architectural

vocabulary.

Sinhalese builders made a more deliberate choice between passive locations: a unique preference for mountainous sites. Mountain paths, boulders, flowing water, and buildings hidden within them have made naturalism a profound national culture and, as in many parts of Asia, they have explored the adaptive architectural elements of corridors and courtyards. Such a traditional construction idea that does not have a clear space boundary, combines natural characteristics, and follows the terrain has also been deeply demonstrated in Bawa's architecture. Local materials, such as stone, wood, brick, and clay tile, are cheap and appropriate, giving the building a unique character.

The main hall of Lankatilaka Temple, which combines Buddhist temples and Hindu temples, ranges from the thick and heavy brick arch structure of Sikhara, a typical form of the Buddhist temple in the Polonnaruwa period, to being covered with triple light tile roofs. A few kilometers away, the Gadaladeniya Temple is more influenced by Buddhism. The Pseudo stupas formed by five Buddha niches and towers are also covered with a double-pitched Kandy-style flat tile roof and supported by Portuguese Tuscan [1].

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Portuguese built forts in Colombo, the Dutch brought spacious stoep and courtyard-centered room organization (**Figure 1**), and the English kept the British Empire style in public buildings and maintained the tradition of villa design around gardens (**Figure 2**). The arrival of the invaders brought more Western classical and neo-classical architectural styles, and further fused them with the local traditional architecture.

The new Sri Lankan middle class chose to live in a smaller and more eclectic house than the houses of their colonial rulers, called "floral panel," which is a localized expression of a decorated bungalow type with stoeps.

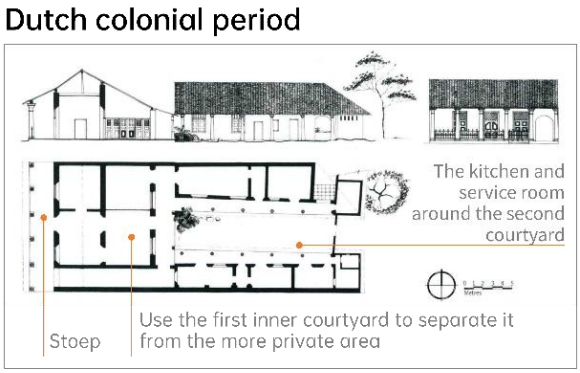

Figure 1. Plan of a typical Dutch house in Galle, redrawn by the author

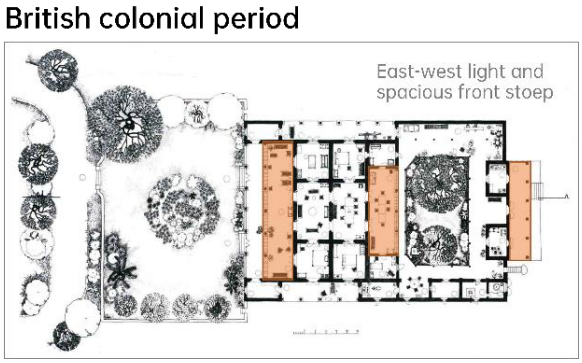

Figure 2. Plan of the main residence of Okanagoda Manor, 1992, redrawn by the author

3. Ena de Silva House

As Bawa says, "Architecture cannot be fully explained, it must be experienced." The refined design that pays attention to the scale of the body and the versatile spatial experience also contribute to the unique delicacy of Bawa's works. One of Bawa's early contemporary vernacular masterpieces, the Ena de Silva House is a rebellion against the established colonial style and a throwback to the traditional Kandy style of housing. 30 pecs (750 m²) of limited land and the owner's cherished family traditions combine to create an inward-looking architectural space, rather than an English-style villa with courtyards surrounding the building.

3.1. The courtyard: a private division and roaming experience

As an urban residence, privacy is enhanced as the space progresses from the street level to the interior of the building. The two-fold inner and outer street-level loggias progressively delineate the boundaries of the

residence while echoing to some extent the memory of the corridor of the early Dutch-style residence. The horizontal inner corridor space is strictly limited by the western wall of the first building and is only connected in front of the narrow entrance and garage. The space shrinks sharply and then opens up to a series of living scenes around a central courtyard (**Figure 3**).

In contrast to the small windows and walls of the guest room and the workshop, the living and dining spaces emphasize shared family communication and east-west penetration. The long and narrow eastern courtyard further shrinks the space, eventually leading to the memorial site of the sanctuary.

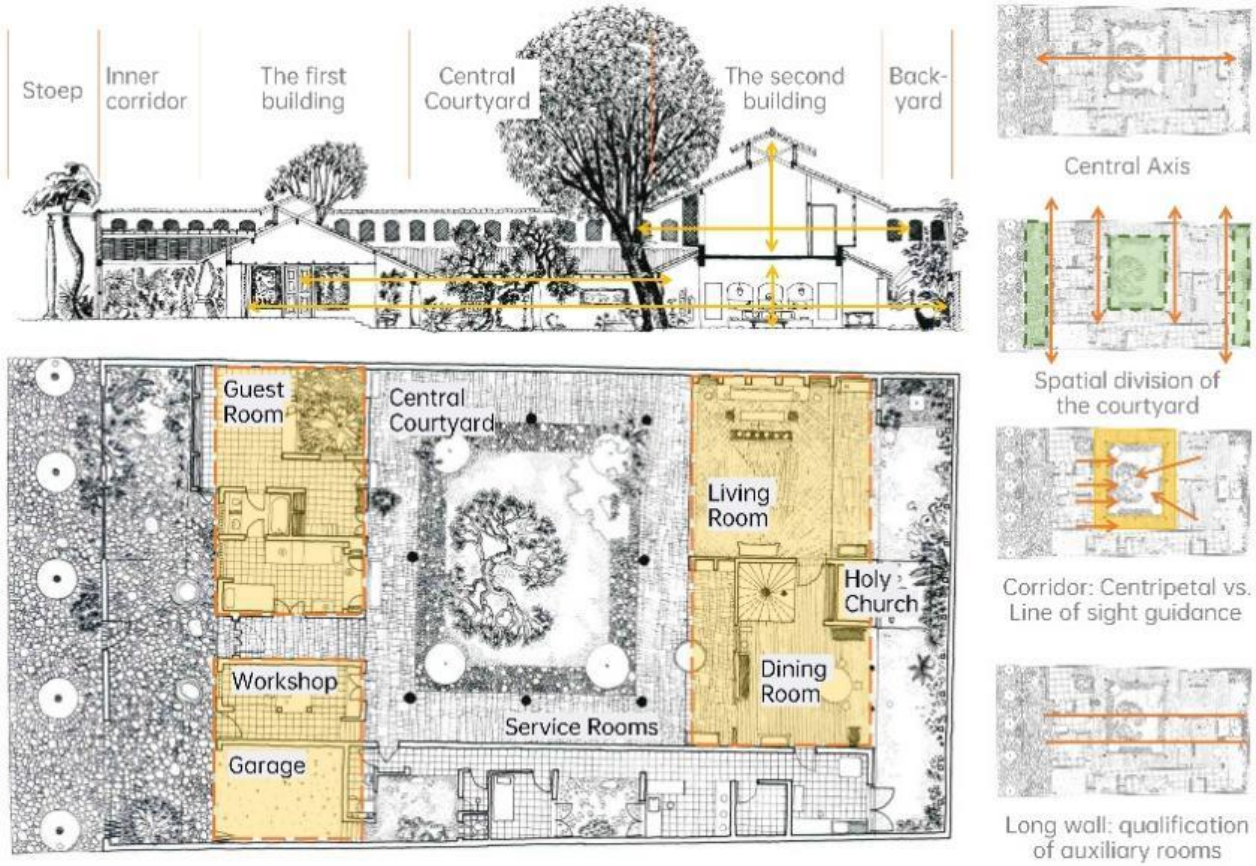

Figure 3. Section and plan of Ena de Silva House, redrawn by the author

3.2. Wrap-around corridor and deep eaves: the horizontal quality of intermediary space

In the central garden space, which is enclosed from north to south, the twisted eggplant trees are divided into separate fragments by different windows, and the trees are the undisputed visual focal point of the courtyard. Such a fragmented visual experience comes mainly from the suppression of the far-reaching gables. The heavy shadows above the deep gables almost violently enclose and cut off the outdoor landscape [2]. This treatment almost forces the people in them to sit or lie down to obtain a low viewpoint appropriate to the framed view of the courtyard.

The depressed beam treatment on the first floor of the main hall implies the perception of space on the second floor, and the bedroom space on the second floor also creates a loftier space through the erection of ventilation skylights; while the horizontal orientation of the very low sight lines forces the horizontal extension, making the limited space appear more profound and wide [3]. Although this type of sloped roof treatment was criticized by the international modernists of the time, Bawa had to admit that the sloped roof was the best strategy to adapt to the tropical climate and it gradually became one of Bawa's architectural languages. "The roof is an ever-present element, protective, prominent, and paramount, in charge of beauty

at any time and in any place" [1].

4. Critical regionalism and the exploration of Chinese architecture

Like Sri Lanka, the stylistic evolution of modern Chinese architecture was influenced by the colonial invasion of the world powers, and in the 1850s, in the face of the developing wave of modernism in the world, Chinese architectural creation was caught in the dichotomy of national form and modernism. A group of architecture scholars who returned from their studies and some foreign architects began to practice modernism on the Chinese ground, which inspired the domestic architects to reflect on the "traditional revival" movement.

The traditional revival can be broadly divided into three models: the "palace style," which is a complete imitation of antiquity; the "hybrid style," which is an eclectic approach; and the forms that highlight traditional decorative symbols [4]. Chinese architects tried to find a new path from traditional architecture to resist the flood of modernism and to continue the spirit of Chinese architecture, but the exploration always remained at the superficial level of decorative symbolism and failed to reach the spiritual level of traditional Chinese architecture.

In the 1920s, in his book *Sticks and Stones, American Architecture and Civilization*, Mumford reconstructed the concept of "regionalism" and for the first time systematically reflected on regionalism itself. Mumford went beyond the previous conflict between regionalism and globalized modernism and tried to explore the universal characteristics of regional culture under the influence of external forces on specific regions, thus eliminating the opposition between local and globalization.

The architects of Guangzhou in the 1950s practiced functionalism based on the characteristics of the subtropical regional climate [5]. They used modernism to oppose formal national styles, while at the same time modifying "international" modernism by adapting it to regional conditions. To a certain extent, these practices break away from the limitations of the decorative doctrine and are discussed from the generation logic of regional architecture.

In the 1970s, Mr. Ge Ruliang undertook a national project on "architecture and nature" and carried out a series of architectural practices in landscape areas based on the regional characteristics of the Jiangnan region. Under the framework of modernism, Mr. Ge Ruliang accomplished the architectural expression of traditional expressions such as transitions and counterpoints, the subtle interpretation of garden space, and the delicate continuation of traditional construction techniques. It can be said that Mr. Ge Ruliang, as a pioneer, broke through the limitations of China's early regionalism exploration.

5. Xixi Villa

Xixi Villa is located in Jiande City, Zhejiang Province, amid Lingqi Shengjing, which has a subtropical north-edge monsoon climate. Xixi Villa, a service building of the oriented Qingfeng Cave, is also named after the cool summer breeze of Qingfeng Cave, which is pronounced Xixi in Mandarin. The overall base is high in the north and low in the south, and the cave entrance is reached gradually by picking up steps.

5.1. Turning path: the transition of light and privacy

The short flow line from the gate of the lodge to the entrance of the cave goes through seven twists and turns. It also completes the open outdoor space of the nature trail to the semi-indoor intermediary space, and then to the fully indoor space of the artificial courtyard and indoor cave [6] (**Figure 4**).

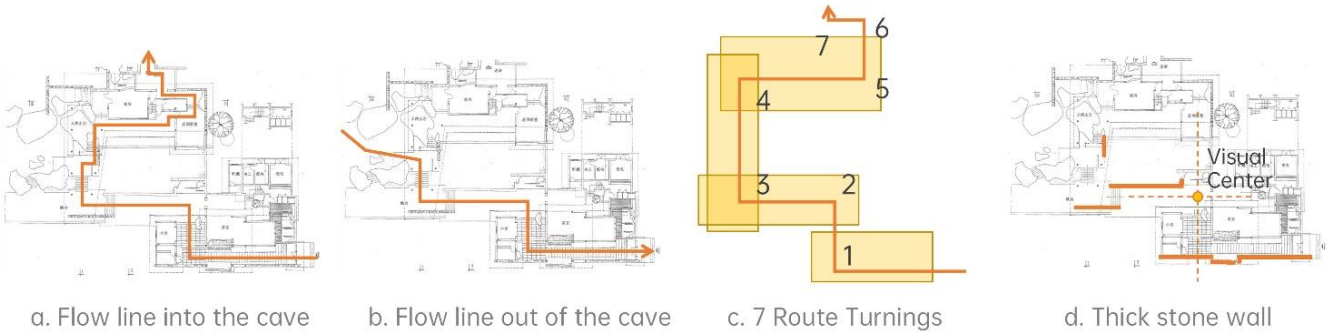

Figure 4. Schematic diagram of the 7 Route Turnings of Xixi Villa

Before the first turn, the entrance corridor is guided by a small scale of implication. The short corridor of ten meters is selectively shaded by the roof to create a three-stage vertical light space of "light-dark-light," and the slight outward thrust of the stone wall on the south side also allows light to penetrate through it, giving a richer creation in the horizontal direction (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5. Spatial changes before the first turning point

5.2. Towards the end: beyond linear guidance

In the next six transitions (**Figure 4**), the winding path is accompanied by nodes, large or small, and mostly attached to a single path itself without leading to the next space, or we call it the "end" space. In such a sequence, the viewer is located at a specific point of view above a path that leads to the site being viewed, as the viewer moves, the scene constantly changes, bringing with it the effect of a subjective reorganization of specific scenes.

These "end" spaces either point to rest, lead to a view, or simply show the opening and closing of space. But they all point to the same act: to stay. The viewer switches between different scenes, with no clear sequence or correlation between scenes. On this basis, the experience is fragmented, ultimately reaching the disorienting experience unique to Chinese gardens (**Figure 6**).

During the recent public transformation of Liuyuan Garden, the Wufeng Xianguan experienced a transformation from a nested space to open and large space as the residential function shifted to a landscape function. The original small-scale room group also constitutes many end spaces on the path side, even similar to the existence of a secret room. Compared with the spirit of place in Western gardens, a self-positioning based on the composition of the objective environment, Chinese gardens do not require the audience to be clear about their own coordinates, nor stay in the appreciation of the scenery itself, but try to find a cultural identity and natural resonance that mobilize all senses, a self-seeking introspection.

In such a path, the arrival of A→B becomes a secondary purpose instead, and staying at different nodes is the self-pleasure of leisurely strolling in the traditional living space, and the more pleasant scale brought by the small-scale space [7]. With the transformation of scenic publicness, the Five Peaks Pavilion

becomes a pause in the path and a counterpart of the large outdoor courtyard, but the mere crossing in the path makes the Five Peaks Pavilion lose its original private and centripetal hierarchy.

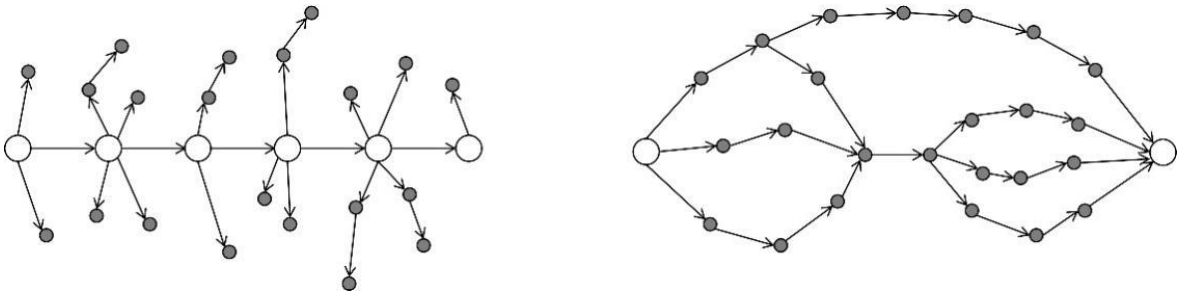

Figure 6. Narrative spatial pattern (left, vector tree; right, flow chart) [7]

The transformation of the spatial form structure also brings about a division of narrative patterns. The partitions and hoods in the garden block the visual corridor, but at the same time reduce the visual perception and lead people to a more multidimensional experience of nature. The space does not exist for the sake of practical function alone, but its spirituality becomes a more important factor. At a time when the Western spatial theory of "architectural walk" is dominant, this spatial structure of "uselessness" and "exhaustion" highlights the regional characteristics.

6. Summary

It is undeniable that both Bawa's and Ge Ruliang's works deeply reflect the control of light, visual guidance, and subtle spatial qualities in the Asian context. However, we can still experience Bawa's stronger modern spatial qualities and westernized view of the garden, as well as his realistic vision and objective representation of the site.

The presence of the central courtyard of Ena de Silva House clearly defines the place of the space, allowing all activities to happen here, under the wrap-around corridor, inducing one to roam, and allowing a clear and gradual transition between interior and exterior. The open courtyard and the airy living and dining space are ordered in pairs, partially dissolving the change of privacy in this space.

For the Chinese space represented by the Xixi Villa, the path of walking is subjected to an almost irrational zigzagging treatment. The viewer is immersed in the paths of nature, as an embellishment in the environment. In the transformation of viewpoints and coordinates, one after another unrelated scenes are transformed in front of the viewer's eyes, breaking away from the linearity of continuity. The purpose is not to lead to a specific window, but to let nature flow in between, where the visual is the medium but the purpose is to look within. The garden is no longer a clearly defined open space, but permeates every end space, interlacing and diffusing.

The main garden, the side garden, and the corridor have a similar spatial relationship explaining the different design intentions. The similarity and differences, the different colors, and such qualities show the unique charm of regionalism, and this is the fundamental point that should not be forgotten, no matter how regionalism and modernism merge and coexist.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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