

THE DISPLACED MOMENT

INTANGIBLE QUALITIES OF HOTEL ENVIRONMENTS



"... When you have leisure, wander idly through my garden in spring, and let an unknown, hidden flower's scent startle you into sudden wondering — let that displaced moment be my gift." ("The Gift")

The Nobel Prize winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) goes on to speak in the same poem of perceiving a sudden "fleck of sunset-light" that "stops you, turns your daydreams to gold, let that light be my innocent Gift. Now I suppose that the *visual* imagery of light might be more appropriate than the one of intangible scent for evoking the delights of unexpected discovery one might hope for on entering a hotel at the end of a long day's travel. No matter what the purpose of one's journey, through space and over time, if a resting place cannot also refresh the spirit by creating shifts in awareness, small joys of a "displaced moment", then the most it can aspire to is

the satisfaction of purely elemental needs: to eat, sleep, bath, etc.

There are many hotels and guest houses throughout the world that do only that: cater to our physical needs which, it is true, are as varied and multiple as the many activities (business and leisure) that induce us to travel. In previous issues of MIMAR we have mentioned some aspects of hotel life, for example the incorporation of popular culture in decorative work, or more critically, what has been called the Five Star Hotel life-style (MIMAR 11), involving high standards of comfort for social elites who can pay for this. The present selection of examples in this issue, ranging from the just finished Faisalabad Serena Hotel to the Basrah Sheraton, a recent hotel that no longer exists, was chosen at least in part because each seemed to possess the potential for bringing into existence the pleasure of a displaced moment.

They involve qualities that surpass the mundane, mediocre, boringly stereotyped hotel environments.

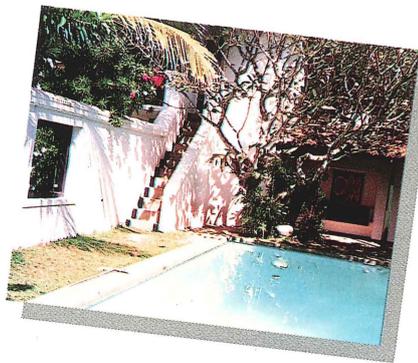
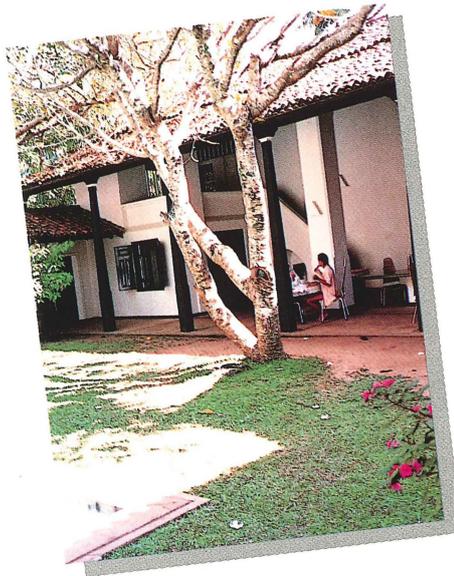
Architects not so long ago introduced design features intended to be spectacular and awe-inspiring into their hotel projects — such as the multi-storey atrium space for lobbies, which some hotel chains even adopted as a kind of trademark. It is not this kind of gimmick which we are attempting to describe, but qualities of place, space, light, materials, all of these operative (as in other types of extraordinary buildings, too) in such a way as to move the observer. Scale can be a factor, but it is practically never the most important one.

Perhaps one crucial dimension to the success or failure of hotel buildings is the degree to which there is a cultural 'fit' with their physical surroundings, whether urban or rural. The Basrah Sheraton, sought to fit in with the modern

cityscape of Basrah but employed architectural features reminiscent of an older building-type, the *khan*. It turned inwards toward the courtyards, but also had typical *mashrabiyya* of wood facing onto the street, and providing a filter for sunlight and privacy from view. The Toraja guesthouses are temporary structures with a very specific traditional purpose: to lodge participants during funeral functions, these guesthouses like the local vernacular architecture of a more permanent type have motifs that are being adopted for new hotel constructions.

Club Villa, an old house which was renovated, modified and extended by architect Geoffrey Bawa into a hotel, nevertheless retains that atmosphere of a small seaside plantation house. Porches, upper floor verandahs, and enclosed garden convey a sense of intimacy and domesticity, of living with nature and the climate, in a time-honoured fashion. At the same, residents are compelled to 'participate' in local country life in the form of the small but crowded railway train that creeps past every day... If the Club Villa maintains its domestic scale while performing as a hotel (with a poetry that is difficult to put into words), the Faisalabad Serena is almost like a small city. Indeed, the concept of a hotel as a village is not new in itself, and many previous attempts by other designers have unfortunately resulted in poor, unconvincing imitations of the original model. These hotels frequently were more concerned with projecting a visual image of the local architecture than with the lasting, or the ephemeral, qualities of that architecture and its immediate environment.

Faisalabad Serena, and the Nile River Hotel project, in a slightly different manner, were designed by architects who sought, however modestly, to incorporate that element of 'discovery' into their buildings. It is *not* a 'Disney World' sense of discovery, rather it is something approaching that "unknown, hidden flower's scent" that enhances the visitor's awareness of the beauty of the site, the indigenouslyness of the materials (e.g. mud



Views of the Club Villa Hotel in Sri Lanka by Geoffrey Bawa which evoke the uniqueness and pleasures of a 'special' environment.
Photographs: Christophe Bon.

or fired brick) or just the delights of being in physical spaces like no other that one has anticipated in a hotel before — at least for the foreign visitor. On the other hand, the 'cultural fit' in the case of both these hotels would make them understandable and hospitable places serving persons from within that local culture.

An exception to what has just been proposed is the Abu Dhabi Inter-Continental which was conceived (as others in that same region) under paradoxical circumstances: there were no precedents nor even utilisable materials in Abu Dhabi to aid in responding 'sensitively' to the government's brief. The facilities required had also to meet the taste and comfort standards articulated by the client, which included the importing of decorative motifs and materials inspired from architecture found elsewhere in the Arab Muslim world. Here the client received what he presumably ordered: a first-class, technologically — and structurally — modern, Western building with an Islamic flavour.

The purpose of our endeavour has not been to describe and comment upon the capacity of hotels such as these to provide the basic services to clients from a full range of categories: businessmen, vacationers, pilgrims or whoever. Nor has it been to delve into the economic and commercial facets of hotel design in developing countries today — which is, nonetheless, highly relevant and worthy of serious debate. Instead, the aim has been to suggest that good design may be capable of eliciting strong emotional reactions in us, of a poetic nature even perhaps, which we take away with us. Whether these 'way stations' be inspired by a single house, a street, a garden or temple as some of the examples here have been, their ability to leave an abiding impression of spiritual well-being will probably depend upon some intangible qualities gleaned by the architect from the context communicated to us through the spaces, forms and light he has conceived.

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