

Emerging trends in contemporary architecture

This exhibition brings together for the first time an exciting collection of contemporary architecture of Italy and Sri Lanka. Before we analyse the current trends of Sri Lankan architecture, it is important to digest the trends of the immediate past — mainly of the colonial Ceylon which enjoyed relative stability, social progress and a well educated elite. It was also a period of discovery — of the island's past, its former glory that colonial mission largely suppressed prompting a soul searching mission for a new identity that was needed at the eve of independence.

It was Mr. Bandaranaike who said in parliament "one day we woke up, and the British said that you are independent now." It is in such slumber that the newly democratised island, with its need of mass appeal crafted an official nationalistic architecture of mono-cultural inspiration harking back in the past. In the case of the independent building to Kandyan Architecture — setting a trend of hipped roofs and imitations at motif level — typifying the worst synthesis of the past and the present representing the inability to differentiate between them. This was the case throughout the post colonial world where politicians had to recreate overnight new notions of nations and its architects clearly identifiable national architecture. Schemes that were equally difficult and inherently problematic.

These newly independent nations had not gone through the historic period that the West had — in which the conflict between religion, science & monarchy were more satisfactorily resolved propelling western societies to predominance. Independent Ceylon, despite its well educated elite, lacked this historical process — that endowed western societies with both the quest for the new and the faith in the future. The Ceylonese elite feudal in extraction, clerical in outlook was fundamentally anti-modern and was not in a mood for modern architecture.

Despite this negativism the freshly educated architects, fired by the events, ideologies and trends of post-war Europe braved to create a new architecture. Out of these the pioneering efforts of Minnete Silva, Ulrik Plesner & Valentine Goonesekera are of significance. Minnete de Silva may be credited for her attempts to marry the core values of the modern movement to the best of local tradition. Ulrik Plesner for his discovery and use of the vernacular and Valentine Goonesekera for his very brave attempts at the extraordinary — totally modern and futuristic architecture — which Bawa experimented with early in his career but abandoned soon after to develop an architecture that was inspired more by the past than the future.

Geoffrey Bawa may be considered the most successful and widely known Ceylonese architect whose work is influential enough to merit the term "Bawa School". Bawa was ready to absorb the best of all traditions and was least affected by the dilemmas of the mono-culturalist in their choice and definition of architecture and culture.

He had rejected modernism in his early years to forge a new vernacular that made good use of local materials, craftsmanship and traditionalist ideology. His success was spectacular and won wide acclaim in buildings of leisure where the refinement of views played the dominant role rather than the built-form which is often

the case in modern architecture. Bawa's work lately he had ventured into the. Although building with contemporary disposition his style is largely remembered as "timber columned" and "tile roofed".

Bawa brought to contemporary Sri Lankan architecture refinement and sensitivities that are unparalleled. He created a good case for the continuation of the vernacular and reinforced, unfortunately in the minds of some that "old is best" and that the "past was perfect". He may be unfairly accused of putting contemporary Sri Lankan architecture on a "vernacular overdrive".

It is in this context that this exhibition focuses our attention on the other strands of contemporary architecture, one evolving out of the Bawa School and the other arising out of global trends in architecture. The architecture of Anura Ratnavibushana, Ashley de Vos, Vijith Basnayake & Ranjith Alahakoon provide an interesting array of the contemporary architecture of local and global inspiration synthesised at a higher level — without resorting to motif level-mish mash.

Higher level of synthesis requires the ability to understand core principles at abstract level and the ability to apply them creatively to new problems, conditions and materials. Such efforts require a high level of absorption, appreciation and understanding that is apparent in their work.

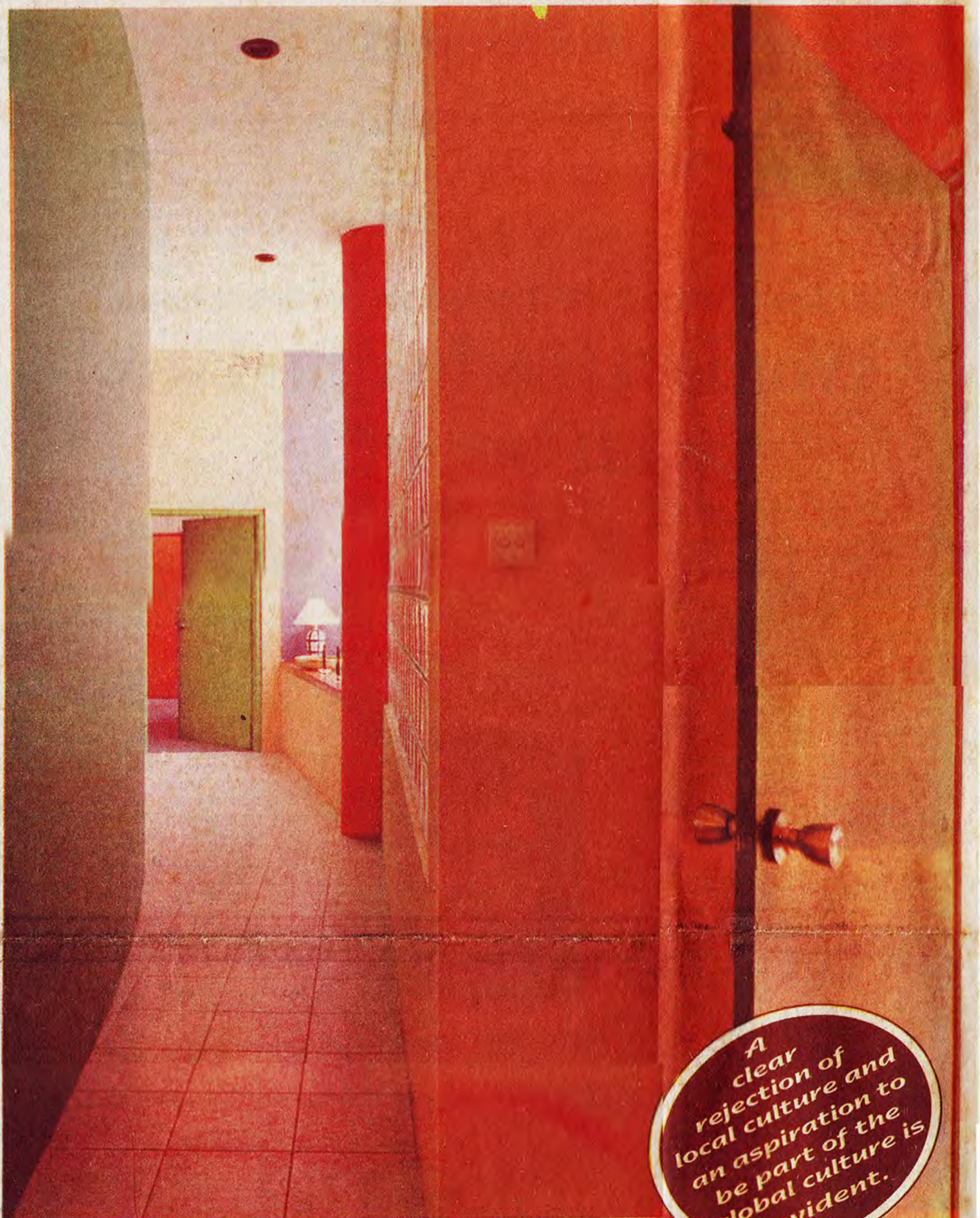
The other dominant trend in architecture is the global trend owing little or nothing to local traditions. It signifies both the rejection of the local and the graceful acceptance of more powerful perhaps more attractive architectural, cultural ideals arising outside the island. Madura Premathilake, Suchith Mohotti, Hiranthi Wellendawa and Jayanath Silva's work exemplify this strand.

Post-Modern & De Constructivist trends are increasingly represented in the main roads of Colombo. This trend is non-nostalgic and has to its credit a positive view of the present & the future. Perhaps this new generation of architects may have a confidence that the older generation lacked in their own heritage, to be able to participate whole heartedly in the making of global culture.

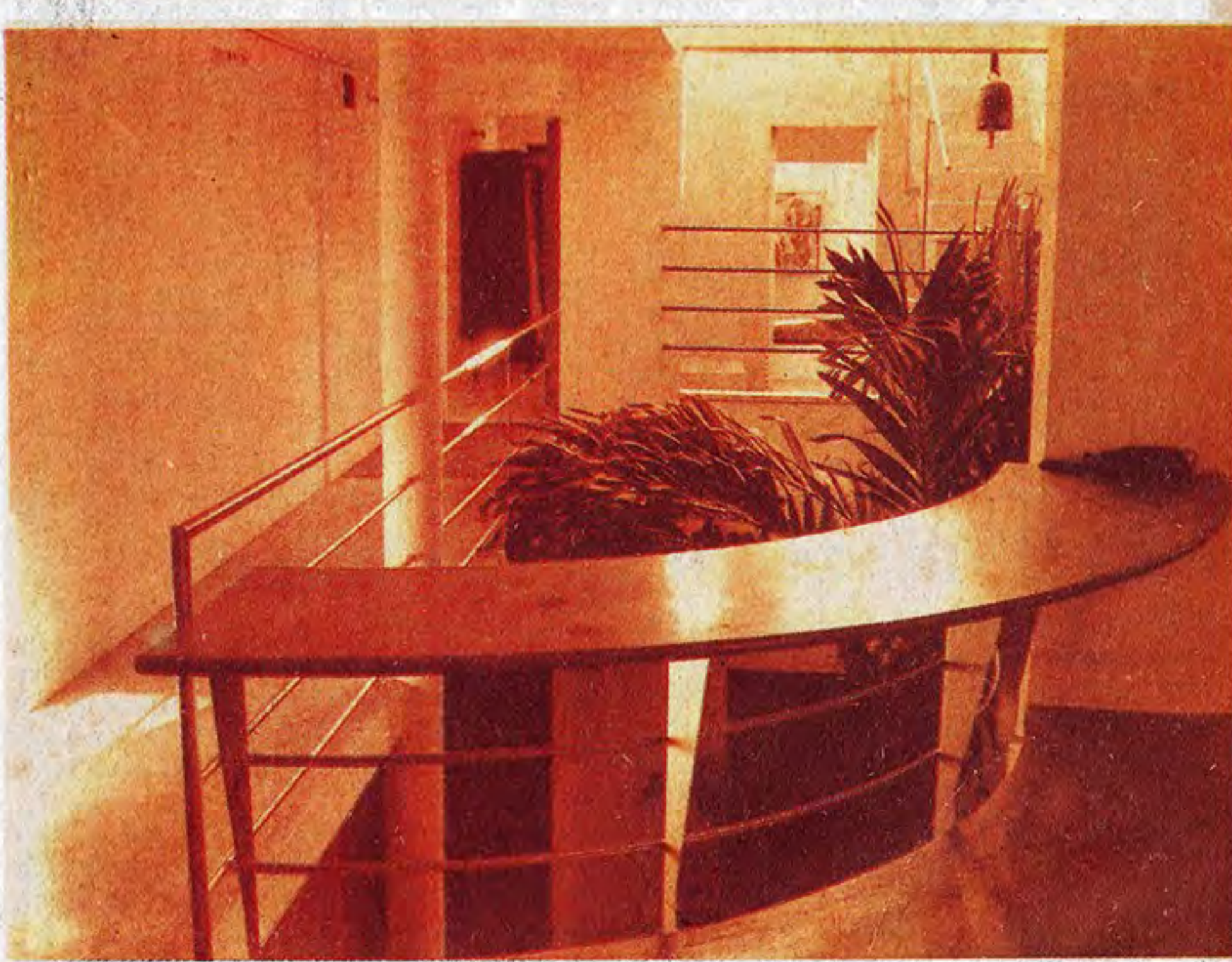
It may also indicate a new awareness, of the difference between the past and the present that the older generation laboured to bridge. Or perhaps they see the gap between the past and the present too wide to be bridged — or architecture as a revolutionary step, leaving a gap that need not be bridged. Whatever the compulsion, there appears in their work a clear rejection of local culture and an aspiration to be part of wider global culture.

The emergence of a new commercial and industrial elite widely travelled and well exposed to global trends and the influence of TV, exposing a much broader cross section of society to global trends has irrevocably eroded the influence of the traditionalist.

Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka is currently enjoying a healthy and prolific period similar to that enjoyed by post-war Europe where significant changes occurred in people's perception of their past, their history and their culture. Art is often inspired by changes and stagnated by stability.



A clear rejection of local culture and an aspiration to be part of the global culture is evident.



Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Brunelleschi, while Switzerland in the same period enjoyed great stability producing only the cuckoo clock. This exhibition establishes that contemporary architecture in the island is a live and kicking and not driven over by the vernacular — which wins accolades abroad as the industrial West seeks to appreciate in the East the past

A review of the recent Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture organised by the Embassy of Italy and Tilak Samarawickrama

that they have left behind. South Asia has an obsession with tradition & culture, giving rise to cultural chauvinism & endless conflicts. It pays a heavy price for the lack of creative vision which is necessary to re-invent itself in a world that is very rapidly changing. Instead of facing its glaring inadequacies, its pundits look even more backwards for inspiration. Only a decadent architecture looks obsessively backwards.....At its most vital, architecture is an agent of change. To invent tomorrow; that is its finest function." — Charles Correa.

by Dr. K. A. Silva