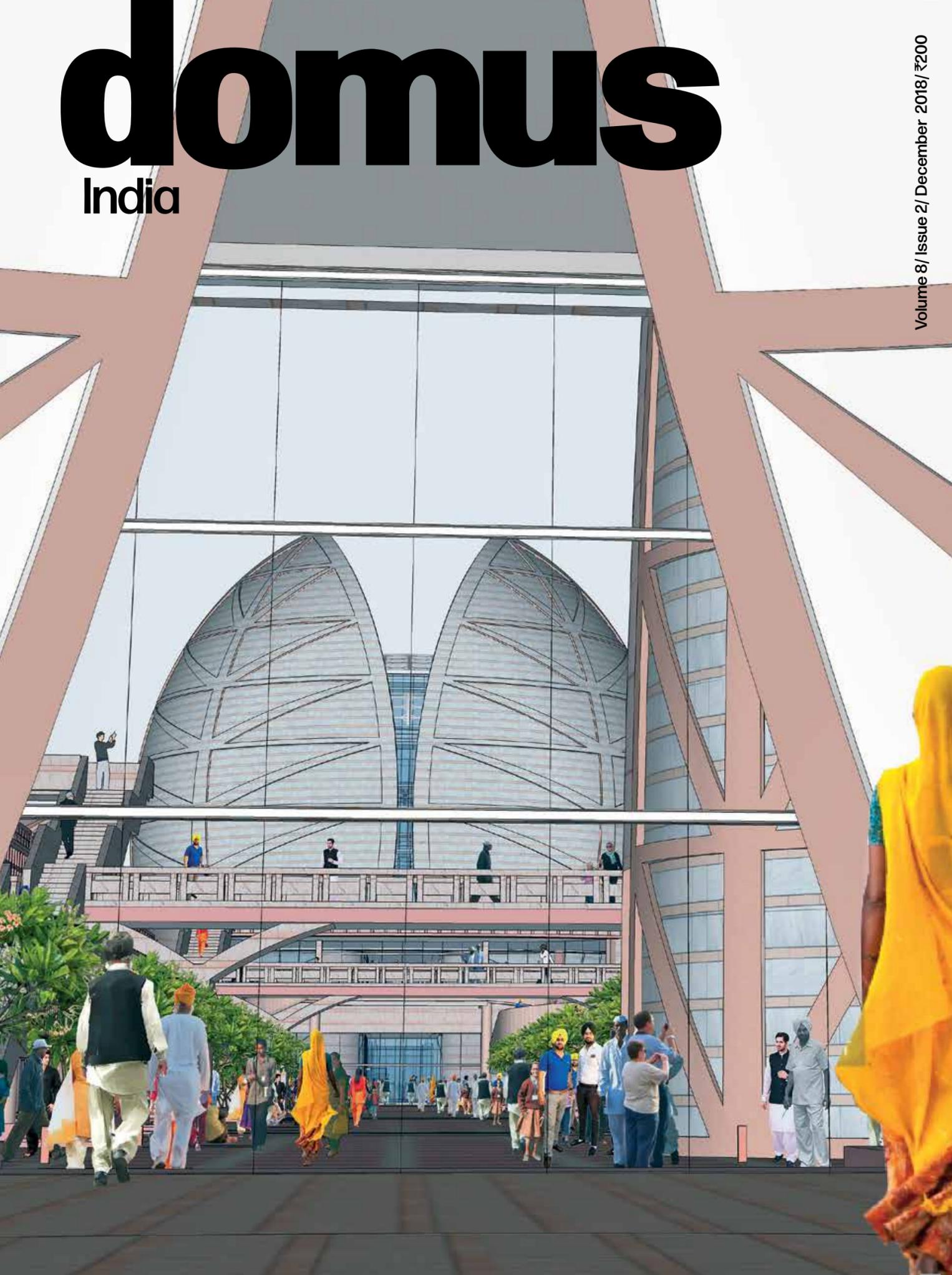


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Cover Design:

The cover depicts a rendering of the complex of the Jang-e-Azadi Memorial and Museum in Kartarpur, Punjab, designed by New Delhi-based Raj Rewal Associates, and completed this year. The zooming into a part of the rendering focuses on three key aspects of this structure and its sprawling campus – firstly the material, that is white marble, occupies the maximum space in the frame; the second is the structural system which creates a clear organisation of thick and bold lines articulating the rectangular frame of the cover; and thirdly, and most importantly, it is the people – the people who will bring life into architecture, especially at a complex such as the Jang-e-Azadi, which is specifically designed to connect the present and future generations to memory and history.

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There has been a generation of architects who set up practice in the 1990s and by the end of the decade, emerged with a clear articulation of their architectural theses as design practitioners; the generation and their work outlined a clear path of experimentation and engagement that showed no essential interest in uncritically towing the line of thought that dominated the 1970s and 1980s. However, at the same time, many practices established in the 1970s or so entered an interesting second phase of their work-careers in the 1990s, and struggled with a change in values, materials, and technology vis-à-vis the design ideas and construction of buildings. It is required that the work of some senior practices from the 1990s onwards be reviewed and critically discussed now with a more contemporary set of questions and thematics.

One of the most vibrant but also excessively discussed and very often uncritically employed ideas – the idea of Indianness in design, which also extends into other themes and practices with ideas and labels such as ‘local’ or ‘regional’ or ‘vernacular’, has undergone critical reviewing. Ideas are never universal or timeless and they need periodic reviewing, especially when they reach a popularity such that it becomes a formula than a thesis, and produces objects that are neither challenging to the senses, nor producing a sense of delight that is

engaging critically the mind and its belief systems. History becomes flattened as ideas turn to formulae, and today, in a country like India, questions of History, memory, and belonging need active debate. History and Indianness are subjects of debate – and it is only debate and discussion that can keep these ideas alive, and they will be most intellectually productive and allow for vibrant experiences only as long as they are alive! The conditions of practice have shifted in many ways – locations of investment, systems of values, programmatic definitions of what happens inside buildings, ideas and availability of technology, library of materials, and so on. The classic urban-rural divide has been blurring for the last two decades nearly, economic upheavals have created new equations between financial resources, social requirements, cultural imaginations, and reinterpretation of professional responsibilities and services. Architecture, and so the architect, stand really at an interesting location of balancing responsibilities and ideas, but also have to constantly define and redefine roles of articulations, as well as the purpose, scope, and limitations of design. What can design do, is an important question that needs to be constantly addressed; in what ways can design intervene and engage with conditions on ground and history, and conditions that are changing in undefined ways? So does design become

the provisional pause to review and debate our conditions of being, working, and living?

In this situation it becomes evident how different generations of architects working and producing contemporary designs and buildings at the present are returning interestingly to questions of form, structure, details, references and notions of visual-thinking as much as systems of spatial investment and experience. Play of the visual-thinking, the ‘thought-images’ articulated as ways of addressing the ground of conditions – relations of sorts, economic, social, familial – could be seen as an emerging methodology of design. Design is more and more about the articulation of thoughts, and the process of designing becomes a way to address realities we encounter as situations of everyday life. Then how does architecture talk about the realities of everyday life – realities of history, of perception, of political relationships, of thinking around our social networks, and what will the tool-kit of designing, of elements that organise and shape buildings mean as a cultural resource?

Kaiwan Mehta 

Integrating built form with nature



The diverse forms of architecture across Sri Lanka are strung together by a common thread – all of them consider the numerous natural elements as opportunities rather than impediments
Text by Ekta Idnany
Photos by Sahil Latheef



This spread, top: As opposed to the caves at Sigiriya, the ones at Dambulla are comparatively primitive and natural as far as human intervention is considered; right: the Dambulla rock-cut cave temples provide a religious reference to the landscape traditions of the 'boulder gardens'
Opposite page: The noteworthy architect Geoffrey Bawa brings nature into sharp focus with the way he attaches the building to the rocks in Kandalama





Architecture in Sri Lanka is as diverse in its spectrum as anywhere else in the world and yet it is unique in its singular approach to the appropriation of nature. Even historically one can see how closely the built form and planning integrates with its natural topography, vegetation and water, using each natural element as an opportunity rather than an impediment. Travelling through the island, whether visiting the UNESCO-certified World Heritage Site of Sigiriya, the historic caves of Dambulla, Geoffrey Bawa's Kandalama and Lunuganga, or architect Palinda Kannangara's recent projects, one can't help but remark how it is impossible to judge any of these works through binary abstractions; such as inside-outside, form-landscape or envelope-materiality since each of them embody these binaries as integral to the other.

The landscape traditions in Sri Lanka have a documented history of more than 2500 years, and one can discover these through the information enshrined in the archaeological remains which inform the continuing longstanding landscape traditions in the country. Sigiriya, the 5th-Century fortified city is considered by scholars to be the oldest and most well preserved city in Sri Lanka. It was laid out along a symmetrical east-west axis and the natural elements on site were respectfully balanced in their asymmetry. The city was

integrated into its hilly topography by creating terraces, pathways, waterways, city walls, moats, open spaces and vegetation. Perhaps the large rocky outcrops that cannot be penetrated by an enemy, informed the main criteria for the selection of the site for designing a fortified city with the royal residence on the summit. Termed as the 'boulder garden' by archaeologist Senake Bandarnayake to describe the incorporation of rocky outcrops and natural landscape into the formal compositions of buildings, it is this trope that continues through in our readings of Sri Lankan architecture across scales. In Sigiriya, the ascending axial path was integrated in between a natural arch formed by two large boulders leaning on one another. This not only underlines the entrance, which was considered as sacred in Sinhalese architecture but since one ascends through the gap using steps, it also calls out the element of the flight of steps that are used as a device to navigate between terraces. Man-made ponds are used as a definitive element in the gardens of Sigiriya, not just as diversion but also to store water and influence the micro-climate in the dry-zone. And finally, as ubiquitous as they appear, the retaining walls made from burnt clay bricks in lime or clay mortar, plastered and then lime-washed were built at Sigiriya to create the extensive terraces. Buddhist traditions mandated that monks may live in forest groves or rock

shelters found in rocky hills identified as Viharas and the Dambulla rock-cut cave temples provide a religious reference to the landscape traditions of the 'boulder gardens'. The Dambulla Caves are more primitive and natural as far as human intervention is considered, while at Sigiriya one can see the deliberate and yet seamless integration of architecture. This argument is further extended when one looks at the Kandalama project by Geoffrey Bawa, situated proximally to the above mentioned projects, which perhaps provided the inspiration.

At Kandalama, to say that Bawa's architecture disappears into the landscape is perhaps stating the obvious. He situates the building by using the terrain to his advantage in section. Bawa brings nature into sharp focus with how he attaches the building to the rocks. Borrowing from tradition, its as if he grows the building around the natural elements, as seen in how the stone rubble entrance steps, made in-situ, wrapping around rocky outcrops. As one walks through the cave like corridor that is built into live rock, one can see the homage that Bawa intends to the boulder-arch entrance at Sigiriya and this is brought more into focus against the white wall that curves around the boulders. Moreover from a distance the entire building appears like a retaining wall that is grown over with ground cover, in effect mimicking the retaining walls that hold terraces,

This page, top: In the house for an artist designed by Palinda Kannangara, the space of the house and the central courtyard is dominated by a large flight of rubble stone stairs that descends from the living room to take advantage of the site section. Looking up from the kitchen one views the terraces on the large rock at Sigiriya

This page, top-left: The landscape design for the house designed by Palinda Kannangara is by Varna Shashidhar; top-right: while the structure resembles a modernist box, a closer reading reveals the nuances of historic traditions of Sri Lankan architecture Bottom, from left to right: At Kandalama, architect Geoffrey Bawa situates the building by using the terrain to his advantage in section. He

brings nature into sharp focus with how he attaches the building to the rocks. As one walks through the cave-like corridor built into the live rock, one can see the homage that Bawa intends to the boulder-arch entrance at Sigiriya. The entire building appears like a retaining wall, and from a bird's-eye view, it would seem like the swimming pools are catchments of rain levelling into a lake in the distance

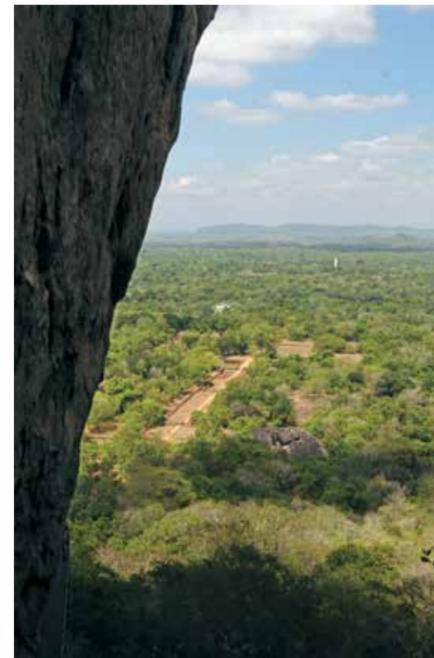




This page: For Palinda Kannangara's home in Colombo, a created topography through the building is augmented by the large double-height windows, allowing one to be connected to the outside in perpetuity

This page, top: Palinda Kannangara's house-cum-studio in Colombo appears as a Brutalist structure at first glance. However, the scale of the opening and the amount of light modulated through creates an effect of being within the cavernous spaces of the Dambulla Viharas. The steps are held between two stark concrete walls that culminate in a fenestration and are a direct allusion to the boulder-arch of Sigiriya

This page, bottom: Views of Sigiriya, the fifth-century fortified city. The city was integrated into its hilly topography by creating terraces, pathways, waterways, city walls, moats, open spaces and vegetation



as witnessed in Sigiriya. From a bird's-eye view, it would seem like the various swimming pools are catchments of rain levelling into the big lake in the distance. Given Sri Lanka is an island, its people have an integral relationship to water and one can see that in historic examples as well as in quotidian life. Water was perhaps the most important organising element in the traditional landscapes created in the dry-zone area of the country. Palinda Kannangara's studio and home is also situated alongside of a waterway in Colombo, and is surrounded by paddy fields in the distance. While the building consistently frames views of the water, water also inhabits the building between the outer brick wall and inner concrete wall helping to adjust the microclimate. The building, at first, appears to be a brutalist, modernist box that possibly overwhelms the immediate context but internally the openness of the building breaks down the volume continually connecting the inside to the outside. But upon entering, one encounters a large flight of steps, made of reclaimed cobbles from a mountain tea plantation, which leads one to the piano noble. The steps are held between two stark concrete walls that culminate in a large fenestration and are a direct allusion to the boulder-arch of Sigiriya. The scale of the opening and the amount of light modulated through creates an effect of being

within the cavernous spaces of the Dambulla Viharas. In section, it doesn't seem like one is ascending floor plates but rather going from one terrace to the next, as in Sigiriya. A created topography through the building is augmented by the large double-height windows that allow one to be connected to the outside in perpetuity. As one reaches the apartment level in the building, it would seem like one has ascended to a promontory, and this is augmented by the biological ponds on the balconies. The house for the artist by Kannangara, is perhaps even more porous. While trajectory and movement in the studio is non-axial and circumambulatory, in the house it is axial. One enters the house to either descend the large flight to the kitchen and studio space or ascend the narrow flight, again reminiscent of the boulder-arch to the private spaces of the bedrooms. But the space of the artist's house and the central courtyard is dominated by the large flight of rubble stone stairs that descends from the living room to take advantage of the site section. Looking back up from the kitchen, one views the living room as one would view the terraces on the large rock at Sigiriya. The living spaces above which the sleeping spaces are suspended have no doors or windows and the building doesn't so much as allow nature in as it simply cocoons a small existing bit of it between high boundary walls. And no mention of the projects is complete without

mentioning Varna Shashidhar's landscape design. The interlocking courtyards that allow light and rainfall into the lower spaces have been planted with indigenous species and the biological pond on the upper level reinforces the connection between Sinhalese architecture and water. A very superficial reading of both projects reveals modernist boxes but a closer reading leads one to see the nuances of historic traditions of Sri Lankan architecture persist in the works of even contemporary architects like Kannangara.

#ThreeFlaneurs (www.threeflaneurs.wordpress.com) is a design and travel blog, and the brainchild of three architects – Ekta Idnany, Sahil Latheef, and Amrita Ravimohan – who believe in the importance of learning architecture through experiencing it in person. Along with conducting regular curated trips for a curious audience, they also organise architecture opens.