

# Minnette De Silva and the Kandyan 'Island'

## The Genesis of Sri Lankan Tropical Modernism

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The Genesis of Sri Lankan Tropical Modernism

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Nestled in the green mountains of central Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Kandy was, for centuries, the city of the “god-kings,” the vibrant capital of the Sinhalese Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Fortified among impenetrable topography, these highlands were disconnected from the rest of the territory, forming an island within the island.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the Kandyan Kingdom resisted Portuguese and Dutch invasions, later falling to the British Raj. From then, its hegemony irreversibly faded, and Kandy became an overlooked shadow of the greatness of its glorious past.<sup>3</sup>

Despite graduating from London, participating in the major architecture events of her time, and networking with the brightest minds of all fields, it was in her beloved hometown that the Kandyan architect Minnette De Silva settled her lifetime studio. However, De Silva’s groundbreaking ideas and visionary discourses outshined Kandy’s island-ness. On the one hand, the distance from the dynamic and accessible urban coast and the capital Colombo was unattractive to hold impactful collaborators and qualified manpower.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Kandy required De Silva’s career to adapt to the challenges of limited networks, restricted client bases, poor technological access, and an

impregnated provincial prejudice towards the first Ceylonese woman architect. It partially (and arguably) influenced her architectural practice, compromising a successful recognition as a new generation of Colomboite architects, driven by her avant-garde, gradually prevailed.

On the other hand, a major thread in De Silva’s career was precisely the revitalisation of the authentic and pre-colonial Ceylonese cultural heritage, characteristic of the region. Influenced by vernacular Kandyan elements, architectural details, construction methods, and spatial concepts, she created an innovative vocabulary, blending her modernist education with solid heritage roots. Self-coined “An Experiment in Modern Regional Architecture in the Tropics,” her houses paired pilotis, free plans, and concrete slabs with traditional weaved mats, wood carved balusters, and Indigenous-inspired terracotta tiles, highlighting the richness of the arts and crafts of the Kandyan “island.”<sup>5</sup> As regional connotations became post-colonial symbols of resistance during the ongoing country’s independence, De Silva’s role became crucial in affirming a national Sri Lankan architectural style, right from the isolated heart of the island.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, despite conditioning, Kandy also shaped the features of De Silva's architecture and enabled the flourishing of a local island of practice grounded in her pioneering designs. It was the genesis of concepts and narratives that marked the Sri Lankan post-colonial architecture, internationally acclaimed afterward through a national school of architects, and greatly influenced by the renowned figure of Geoffrey Bawa under the umbrella of Tropical Modernism.

Integrated into my doctoral research, this paper builds on De Silva's autobiography as her major archive – the book *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect* – and my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, where I visited De Silva's swiftly deteriorating oeuvre.<sup>7</sup> It scrutinizes extensive literature about the history of Ceylon and Kandy, offering a theoretical reflection on the entanglements of De Silva's practice with the idiosyncrasies of the Kandyan "island." This research argues that De Silva's independent practice is at the origin of what is nowadays an established Sri Lankan architectural school.

7.

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