

Western-Based or Decolonised Welfare Planning? Ulrik Plesner's Role in Town Design for the Mahaweli Development Programme in Sri Lanka (1982–1987)¹

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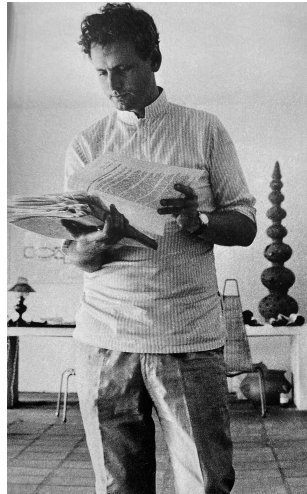


Fig. 15. Ulrik Plesner © Plesner architects

¹ This article is an expanded version from a paper presented at ‘Staying with Modernity? (Dis)Entangling Coloniality and Architecture’, the XIth Annual Conference of the Jaap Bakema Study Centre, 20–21 November 2024, Delft University of Technology (Delft), Nieuwe Instituut (Rotterdam). The original paper was published in the Conference Proceedings.

Introduction

The Danish architect Ulrik Plesner (1930–2015), not to be confused with his homonymous uncle (1861–1933), has received little scientific attention until now². Interested in Buddhism, he was invited to Ceylon – then an independent Commonwealth country – by architect Minette de Silva in 1958. He later returned to Sri Lanka (contemporary name of Ceylon since 1973) from 1982 to 1987. There, he assisted the design of 12 new towns for the Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP).

The MDP is an agency-driven project of spatial planning initiated with a pre-investment survey carried by the United Nations Development Program in 1963 and then supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank. The programme included the building of dams to double electricity production, the improvement of flood control and the irrigation of rice production in the northeastern dry zone of the Mahaweli River drainage basin. Motivated by developmentalist goals of self-sufficiency, endogenous economic development and welfare housing, the MDP originally envisioned the resettlement of one million workers into new rural towns equipped with low-cost housing and located near workplaces. Plesner served as a consultant for the Mahaweli Architectural Unit (MAU), which was directed by Sri Lankan architect Nihal Perera. This agency was responsible for both the design of master plans and the development of low-cost housing, the latter being carried out by Danish architect Lene Funch.

Legitimised by a nationalist narrative and praised as a new chapter in the Sinhalese ‘hydraulic civilisation’, its centralised, vertical integration was based on two models of spatial planning³. The first was the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal American corporation of electricity utility established in 1933 during the New Deal, focused on regional planning and economic development. The second was Central-Place Theory, introduced by German geographer Walter Christaller in 1933 to explain the spatial distribution of human settlements. The implementation of the MDP reflected

² Vibeke Andersson Møller, *Dansk arkitektur i 1960'erne* (Humblebæk: Forlaget Rhodos, 2020), 486–490.

³ Nirodha Kumari Meegahakumbura Dissanayake, ‘Evaluating New Towns in the Context of Mega Projects: A Case Study of the Mahaweli Architectural Unit, Sri Lanka (1983–1989)’, Master thesis, School of Architecture and Built Environment, The University of Adelaide, 2016, 66–68; 35–43.

the contradictory tensions between the influx of Western technical expertise and a ‘bottom-up’, vernacular-based approach to housing and town design that was supported at the MAU.

By focusing on his career and his role in the MAU through the lens of his Danish background, this article examines Plesner’s critique of architectural modernity, and his entangled position within the processes of decolonisation, the Sri Lankan planning framework and his professional relationships with his fellow architects at the MAU, specifically Perera and Funch. It aims to critically examine Plesner’s approach to design and explore his engagement with the political and economic logics underpinning the MDP. Here, welfare is apprehended as a comprehensive policy intertwining spatial planification with the improvement of living standards in a context of developmentalism. This last school of thought presents various theoretical frameworks, many of which argue that large-scale infrastructure projects and production self-sufficiency are achieved through State-led economic development⁴. Yet, the MDP offers an original model of developmentalism prioritising agricultural production and housing settlement ahead of industry.

While the scientific literature on the Mahaweli Development Program is extensive, little research has been conducted on Plesner’s specific role in the architectural team of the Mahaweli Architectural Unit (MAU), where he was a key figure but not an exclusive one⁵. Most studies have focused either on the broader role of the MAU within the planning framework⁶, or indirectly on Plesner through the accounts of his former MAU partner Nihal Perera⁷. The few existing research specifically dealing with his

⁴ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Strategy of Economic Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

⁵ Dorian Bianco, *Interview with Nihal Perera*, 4 February 2025, 1.

⁶ Nirodha Kumari Meegahakumbura Dissanayake, Katharine Bartsch, and Peter Scriver, ‘Designing Sustainable Settlements in the Context of Megaprojects: Lessons Learnt From the Mahaweli Architectural Unit, Sri Lanka (1983–1989)’, in Jian Zuo, Lyrian Daniel and Veronica Soebarto, eds., *Fifty Years Later: Revisiting the Role of Architectural Science in Design and Practice: 50th International Conference of the Architectural Science Association 2016*, The Architectural Science Association and The University of Adelaide, 2016, 189–198.

⁷ Nihal Perera, *Society and Space. Colonialism, Nationalism, and Postcolonial Identity in Sri Lanka* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1998).

Sri Lankan period focuses on his surveys during the 1960s⁸. Along with design materials (plans, drawings and photographs) and Plesner's narrative taken from his own memoirs⁹, this article uses three interviews carried out with Nihal Perera, Lene Funch and Danish Dan Wajnman, architects and former partners of Plesner at the MAU. It aims to critically reassess his actual involvement, which was less significant than he claimed, revealing his role as the symbolic 'father' of the team. This article will successively cover the history and model of the MDP, the architectural and urban design of the MAU, and Plesner's critique of architectural modernity.

The Mahaweli Development Program and Welfare Planning in Twentieth Century Ceylon

The history of economic and social welfare in Sri Lanka dates back to British Ceylon and has been closely intertwined with spatial planning¹⁰. The Donoughmore era (1931–1947), the final phase of British colonisation, encouraged land resettlement in the northeastern dry areas in 1935 after the recovery of tea prices (1933)¹¹. After gaining independence, Ceylon focused on reducing food imports by stimulating agriculture in the dry zones, which became a key vector of economic development. In 1953, the Gal-Oya Colonisation Scheme was launched by the centre-right government of Dudley Senanayake (United National Party, UNP). The scheme aimed to boost electricity production and improve irrigation. The resettlement involved relocating both Sinhalese and Tamil people to rural farms, 'semi-scattered villages'¹².

⁸ Hikaru Kinoshita, Wada Akiyo, 'Design Survey by Ulrik Plesner and Barbara Sansoni in Sri Lanka, スリランカにおけるウルリック・プレスナーとバルバラ・サンソン二を中心とするデザインサーベイ: A Study on architectural cosmology of Geoffrey Bawa Part 1ジェフリー・バワの建築観に関する研究その', in *Journal of Architecture and Planning* 85 (2020), 1355–1365.

⁹ Ulrik Plesner, *In Situ: Arkitektoniske Erindringer fra Sri Lanka* (Hong Kong: Aristo, 2012), 452.

¹⁰ Jayasuriya Laksiri, 'The Evolution of Social Policy in Sri Lanka 1833–1970: The British Colonial Legacy', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 46 (2001), 1–68.

¹¹ Kingsley Muthumuni De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005), 570–589.

¹² Dissanayake, 'Evaluating New Towns in the Context of Mega Projects', 161.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) brought the socialist Solomon Bandaranaike to power (1956–1959). His administration, guided by the principles of mixed economic planning, implemented comprehensive programmes of social welfare with the increase of agriculture capacity and the redistribution of incomes¹³. However, the developmentalist doctrine in Sri Lanka has been criticised for insufficient industrial investments which prevented further reinvestment of wealth production in the Welfare State¹⁴.

The socialist government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1960–1965), Solomon's daughter, envisioned the MDP in 1963 after the pre-investment survey of the United Nation Development Programme¹⁵. Like the Tennessee Valley Authority, the MDP sought to double electricity production by constructing dams on the Mahaweli River. The project also sought to address flooding, thereby increasing rice production and enhancing irrigation in the dry North-Western Mahaweli basin. The MDP incorporated the Central-Place Theory to guide the settlement pattern and replace flooded towns, establishing a hierarchy of disseminated town centres near production sites. 2 to 4 'area centres' providing basic services were subdivided into village centres, each comprising several hamlets. Each of these was designed to accommodate 300–600 households¹⁶. Town implantation followed the scattered model of the Gal-Oya scheme with the dissemination of rural towns. Representing nearly one quarter of the national expenditures, the Mahaweli Development Program (MDP) was initially planned in two stages (1968, 1974), the later with a thirty-year master plan¹⁷. The relocation increased over the years, to the point that, in 2006, 144,000 families had been relocated on the Mahaweli farms¹⁸. The plans were implemented following the technical guidelines of

¹³ Nagalingam Balakrishnan, 'The Five Year Plan and Development Policy in Sri Lanka: Socio-Political Perspectives and the Plan', *Asian Survey* 13/12 (1973), 1155–1168.

¹⁴ Satchi Ponnambalam, *Dependent Capitalism in Crisis, the Sri Lankan Economy, 1948–1980* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1981), 2.

¹⁵ Dissanayake, 'Evaluating New Towns in the Context of Mega Projects', 3.

¹⁶ Dissanayake, Bartsch, and Scriver, 'Designing Sustainable Settlements in the Context of Megaprojects', 189–198.

¹⁷ 'Sri Lanka: Appraisal of Mahaweli Ganga Development Project', Report No. 1487a-CE, Agriculture Division, South Asia Projects Department, World Bank, 31 March, 1977, 1.

¹⁸ Nihal Perera, 'When Planning Ideas Land: Mahaweli's People-Centered Approach', in Patsy Healey and Robert Upton, eds, *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 144.

Western expertise, as only the French engineering firm Sogreah claimed that settlement pattern of MDP towns was inspired by the size and locations of the ‘purana gam’, the traditional Sinhalese village¹⁹.

After the socialist-oriented Sri Lanka Freedom Party government (1970–1977), which employed mixed central planning and protectionism, the election of the United National Party led to the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy, opening the MDP to Western investments, aid and expertise²⁰. An Accelerated Mahaweli Programme was implemented from 1977 to 1991 with extensive foreign financing, including Sweden for the Kotmale Dam and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida) which funded Plesner’s first year of stay²¹. The MDP remains the largest development programme in Sri Lanka’s contemporary history and stands as one of the most ambitious in the Asian part of the Global South. Its scale was such that a separate State-owned enterprise, the Mahaweli Authority, was established in 1979. Conversely to the classical theory of developmentalism that emphasises industry, the Sri Lankan State-led economic planning prioritises agriculture as the key area of development. We could interpret the MDP’s political economy as a specific integration of physiocracy that stresses agricultural production as the primary source of wealth, with mercantilism that focuses on maximising exports and minimising imports to strengthen domestic production and economic self-sufficiency. The use of foreign aid and models for economic decolonisation represents a typical paradox of post-independence developmentalism²² which, in the case of the MDP, succeeded in achieving near self-sufficiency in rice production by the mid-2000s²³.

Among the foreign aid including substantial financing from Sweden and Japan, Denmark played a key role in providing architects and experts.

¹⁹ MDB and Sogreah. 1972. *Mahaweli Ganga Development: Project 1: Feasibility Study for Stage II: Vol. VII – Settlement Planning and Development* (Colombo: Mahaweli Development Board).

²⁰ Naveen Wickremaratne, ‘The Rationale of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme’, in Hans-Peter Müller and Siripala T. Hettige, eds, *The Blurring of a Vision: The Mahaweli: Its Social, Economic, and Political Implications* (Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Book Pub. Services, 1995), 24–70.

²¹ Dissanayake, ‘Evaluating New Towns in the Context of Mega Projects’, 25.

²² Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism. Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 1–34.

²³ Perera, ‘When Planning Ideas Land’, 144.

In 1981, the engineering and consultancy firm Kampsax-Krüger A/S sent a multidisciplinary team of engineers and researchers in social sciences for a health and hydrological planning study of rural areas, that was focused on Matale and Polonnaruwa. Kampsax-Krüger's report on water management was addressed to the Sri Lankan authorities as part of larger programmes of agricultural intensification²⁴.

Neighbourhood Design in the Mahaweli Architectural Unit

Plesner had become acculturated with Sri Lankan architecture and culture well before his stay for the MDP. Young, while he gathered knowledge about the postwar American homes of Wright and Neutra, he started extensive readings on Indian art and finally became interested in Hinduism after reading in 1955 a book entitled *The Sacred Art of India* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The following year, he became acquainted with Buddhism and participated in the competition for a commemorative monument to honour the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's death, commissioned by Nehru. He was awarded the third prize, earning him an invitation to Ceylon by G. E. Kidder Smith in 1958, where he met Minette de Silva²⁵. During his stay until 1967, he visited with Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa traditional Sinhalese buildings, with a particular focus on the synthesis between local designs and Portuguese and Dutch colonial styles. He also carried out surveys of temples, houses, manors and other structures including the *ambalam*, the roadside pavilions used as shelters against the heavy rains of the monsoon season²⁶. Plesner worked at Bawa's office from 1959, a period during which he divided his activities between designing houses, schools, infrastructures, and writing about Ceylonese culture and architecture in architectural reviews and publications. He gradually started to fall out with Geoffrey Bawa as he felt his partner role was neglected. Sent on a trip to Israel in 1966 to study Hilton's hotels, he met the Jewish-Lithuanian academic Tamar Liebes

²⁴ Jan Hjarnø, 'Vandplanlægning i Sri Lanka', *Den nye verden*, Center for Udviklingsforskning 16 (1982).

²⁵ Plesner, *In Situ*, 40–42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55–69.

and married her back to Colombo. They moved the next year to London²⁷. They finally settled in Israel in 1972 where Plesner established his own firm and became Jerusalem's State architect²⁸. While inflation hit Israel during the 1980s, Plesner temporarily closed his firm when he received from the Sri Lankan government the opportunity to participate in the largest town and country planning project of Sri Lanka, the MDP.

In 1981, Plesner was invited by the MDP minister Gamini Dissanayake to participate in the new town programme. The first master plans were fully drafted the same year at the Mahaweli Planning Unit in Colombo. In the view of Perera, one of the office's young employees, they lacked understanding of the social functioning of future settlers²⁹. The following year, Plesner met Perera, and together they reviewed the master plans and surveyed the Mahaweli area. Leveraging his connections with political and economic elites, Plesner successfully negotiated the creation of the Mahaweli Architectural Unit (MAU, 1983–1989), after they both presented to Dissanayake a redrafted plan of towns with shops. The MAU was a specific agency aimed at integrating architectural, landscape, environmental and social concerns into the new town programme³⁰. The agency was responsible for low-cost housing and urban design, with Nihal Perera as Chief Architect-Planner and Plesner as Acting Director³¹. Before, the two main agencies driven by engineers and officials only handled financing (Mahaweli Economic Agency) and building (Mahaweli Engineering and Consultancy agency)³². Plesner's strong connections with the Sri Lankan elite positioned him as a manager and promoter of the MAU's work, while most of the design was carried out by his colleagues at the MAU³³.

Plesner gathered a team of five architects from the MDP Water management department. His key role inside the future MAU contrasted with his

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dorian Bianco, *Interview with Nihal Perera*, 1.

³⁰ Shanti Jayewardene, 'Mahaweli Development Programme, Sri Lanka', in Hasan-Uddin Khan, ed., *Mimar 28: Architecture in Development* (Singapore: Concept Media, 1988), 33–39.

³¹ Perera, 'When Planning Ideas Land', 159.

³² Ibid., 151.

³³ Dorian Bianco, *Interview with Dan Wajzman*, 24 February 025.

weak position compared to engineers, largely due to difficulties in recruiting assistant designers. Once he settled his office in a former rubber factory in Digana near Kandy, Plesner conducted job interviews with little experienced architectural students³⁴. The salaries offered were poor, and only Plesner received a higher income from the World Bank. He expressed to foreign agencies his concern that aid programmes were failing to strengthen a local and national middle class of graduates, including architects, engineers, and officials³⁵. His office at Digana finally gathered a small group of 18 architects and 18 draftsmen. However, his role was less directive than he stresses in his own memoirs, as he worked equally with Perera and the design was commonly elaborated with his team. Over the years, he spent only one month out of every four in Sri Lanka and mostly stayed in Israel at the end³⁶.

Plesner coordinated guidelines for town design. His memoirs display the Welikanda master plan (1987)³⁷ designed by Dan Wajnman, whose stay was funded by the European Community. A central square organises the civic, commercial and social life of the town (Fig. 2), framed by four L-shaped buildings of two-storey height. The buildings host shops on the ground floor, with bedrooms for shopkeepers on the upper floor and kitchens in a backyard building. This core urban centre is surrounded by a series of municipal welfare infrastructures: school, dormitories for pupils, hospital and phone centres. The dense-low morphology of attached one- or two-storey infrastructures combines the centrality of services and shopping areas with a rural townscape. The street layout forms a T-shaped network, with two secondary square plazas bordered by service buildings arranged in both attached and detached layouts. While the Sinhalese rural settlements were usually scattered, less built and greener, Plesner opposedly advocated for high density in town centres³⁸. He rejected the planned developments of Ampara and Anuradhapura of the postwar Gal-Oya scheme, where scattered urban settlements with wide streets were intended to support an increased traffic with modern means of transportation³⁹.

³⁴ Plesner, *In Situ*, 378.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 380–381.

³⁶ Dorian Bianco, *Interview with Nihal Perera*, 4 February 2025, 3.

³⁷ Plesner, *In Situ*, 414–419.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 387.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

small planned communities designed as a network of garden towns⁴¹. The neighbourhood unit concept was first introduced in India during the late British colonial rule and passed on by Indian officials and planners. Referred to the old self-sustained rural communities, the ‘village panchayats’⁴², several new towns followed the neighbourhood unit as Bhubaneswar designed from 1966 by German architect Otto Königsberger⁴³. In the Mahaweli towns, the shared principles with the neighbourhood unit concept appear to be largely empirical and intuitive to prevent the mere aggregation of houses without fostering social integration within a community.

While the design of half-pedestrian areas was uncommon to Sri Lanka, Plesner’s settlement choice apart from major roads was inspired, according to Plesner’s narrative, by the remote location of ancient Sinhalese rural towns before the British colonisation of the kingdom of Kandy starting in 1815⁴⁴. This model aimed to combat the tendency of towns to cluster around major roads, which often became congested and required the recurrent construction of bypasses. In postwar Sri Lanka, urban expansion led to ribbon development of shops along main roads, gradually splitting small towns in two and blurring urban boundaries by generating small conurbations⁴⁵. Sri Lankan architect Jagath Munasinghe has schematised the settlement pattern of rural towns in four stages: (1) initial clustering around a major road, which (2) necessitates the rerouting of circulation onto a bypass, followed by (3) congestion with the planning of a railway station during the British colonial era, and finally (4) the development of a third new street within the town to accommodate traffic⁴⁶. This centrifugal movement characterises the unplanned spatial processes from the nineteenth century, while the MDP aimed to counteract by a centipede urban development.

⁴¹ Dissanayake, ‘Evaluating New Towns in the Context of Mega Projects’, 249.

⁴² Vidyarthi Sanjeev, ‘Reimagining the American neighbourhood unit for India’, in Patsy Healey and Robert Upton, eds., *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 73–94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁴ Plesner, *In Situ*, 387.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁴⁶ Jagath Munasinghe, ‘Planning and Self-Organizing: The case of small towns in Sri Lanka’, in Nihal Perera, and Wing-Shing Tang, eds., *Transforming Asian Cities: Intellectual impasse, Asianizing Space, and Emerging Translocalities* (London: Routledge, 2012), 227–241.



Fig. 17. Shops on the covered passageway in Welikanda © Plesner architects

The Mahaweli towns attempted to create an alternative model of urban centrality opposing the spontaneous reconfiguration of spatial settlement due to urban explosion. For instance, the buses would stop by the main inner street to directly connect the pedestrian areas where, like in Clarence Perry's neighbourhood unit, children could walk to school without crossing traffic⁴⁷. Yet, the goal of MAU was to find a compromise between a lively and a highly frequented centre by locals, but without traffic congestion.

⁴⁷ Perera, 'When Planning Ideas Land', 164.

As such, the dense-low urban design of town centres was not intended to be fully planned by architects and locally employed engineers. According to Perera, the plans were ‘loose-fit’ so that settlers could themselves arrange the uses of commercial and public spaces⁴⁸.

Low-cost Housing and the Critique of Tropical Modernism

Around those service centres, zoning reserved plots for single detached homes⁴⁹. Within Plesner and Perera’s team, Danish architect Lene Funch hired by Danida was in charge of designing low-cost housing typologies for those developments. These houses were pragmatic in using local contractors and masons, assisted by architects at the first stage, and then gradually self-built and implemented without further help. These guidelines were not regulations but encouragement to continue the building methods introduced by the architects, such as the use of tiled roofs instead of metal sheets.

Lene Funch worked on the low-cost homes for the MAU from 1985 to 1987 (Fig. 3)⁵⁰. Near the office, she designed ‘demonstration houses’ (*demonstrationshuse*) for Mahaweli workers’ nuclear families. Its core model consists of a single-story rectangular volume, covered by a slightly overhanging gable roof for rain protection. It is built with whitewashed mud bricks (30 x 30 x 15 cm) made from local clay to reduce costs. The basic plan included a living room, a kitchen, one bedroom and two verandas⁵¹. The houses were made according to interviews with housewives, the sizes of families and the functions of traditional habits. The continuous involvement of settlers in the building process was intended to help them construct their own houses once the architects left Sri Lanka. They were categorised into five types, ranging from 30 to 90 m², with provisions for extensions to accommodate intergenerational families, a characteristic feature of traditional Sri Lankan architecture. Financed by American loans, their implementations were at moderate cost with an average price around 24.000 rupees (80 \$) if they

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ulrik Plesner, ‘The Mahaweli Buildings’, *Living Architecture* 5 (1986), 84–88.

⁵⁰ Dorian Bianco, *Interview with Lene Funch*, 9 February 2025.

⁵¹ Lis Garval, ‘Hemmeligheden er cement’, *Udvikling: månedsavis om Danmark og udviklingslandene*, Særnummer 1 (1987), 21.

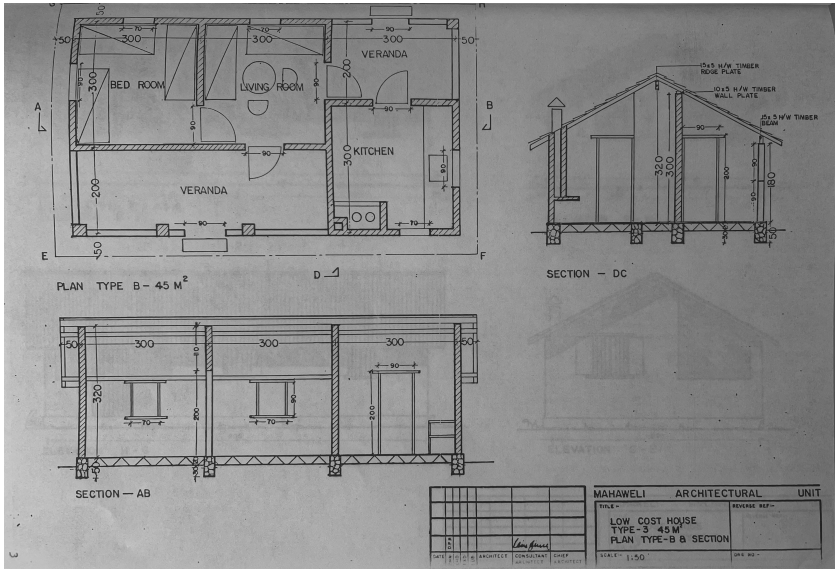


Fig. 18. Low-cost home designed by Lene Funch © Lene Funch

were built by the settlers themselves, and 13.000 rupees more (43 \$) if built up by local contractors⁵².

At the MAU, Plesner was also implicated in the collective design of several building prototypes (temples, shops, welfare infrastructures) which he described as being inspired by Sinhalese vernacular architecture⁵³. But his intermittent presence left much of the work to the draftsmen, especially Dan Wajnman. Those buildings feature pitched roofs on rectangular buildings similar to rural housing. Inspired by the walauvas (feudal manors), the service buildings are designed with a covered passageway on the ground floor for the store displays and cantilever wood-beam roofs on the upper floor⁵⁴. Other vernacular-inspired repertoire includes inner courtyards and verandas. The administrative buildings of Welikanda presents an open

⁵² Poul E. Sjevstrup, 'Danske pige bygger huse på Sri Lanka', *Jylland Posten*, Date unknown.

⁵³ Plesner, 'The Mahaweli Buildings'.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

corridor under a tiled roof, and an upper floor covered by a pitched roof that strictly follows the profile of nineteenth century Sinhalese manors. As well, the model of Buddhist temples follows the basic typology of those of which he published photographs and survey drawings for an article written with Bawa on ancient Ceylonese architecture in *Arkitekten* (1965)⁵⁵. The acculturation with vernacular architecture and dense urban design is transversal in Plesner's practice. While working at the MAU, his associate Wajnman at the independent firm Plesner&Wajnman architects designed in 1987 a shopping centre at Hillerød (Denmark). Its rows of gable-walls hiding the inner shops facilities evokes Welikanda's linear townhouses along main inner shopping streets, highlighting a transitional vernacular-based design.

Architectural design plays an essential role in Plesner's long-term critique of modernism. During a trip to India in 1963, Plesner blamed Le Corbusier for ignoring local crafts during the construction of Chandigarh. He especially criticised his Danish fellow Arne Jacobsen for his proposal of Parliament House in Islamabad (1963). In this project, the assembly room is housed within a cylinder inserted in a rectangular building, elevated on piles, with offices surrounding an inner courtyard. The upper floors were intended to have air conditioning in the conference halls. Plesner perceived this project as an out-of-touch design, directly imported from a drawing office in Copenhagen rather than developed with a field understanding of local conditions, given the high risk of frequent blackouts in Pakistan⁵⁶. However, Jacobsen did visit the site upon his engagement with the Pakistani authorities, which requested him to include Islamic design such as a dome on the cylinder. He refused and his contact was cancelled⁵⁷. In the eyes of Plesner, Jacobsen embodies the figure of the unadapted and uncompromised modern architect. In contrast, the Mahaweli towns would use local materials and

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Bawa, and Ulrik Plesner, 'Gamle Bygninger på Ceylon', *Arkitekten* 16 (1965), 317–323.

⁵⁶ Plesner, *In Situ*, 151.

⁵⁷ Abdur Rehman, 'Contribution of International Architects in the Design of Capital Complex at Islamabad', *Journal of Research in Architecture & Planning* 8, 1–13.

typologies, and reproduce vernacular bioclimatic design like cross ventilation to naturally cool down interiors⁵⁸.

Perera's accounts⁵⁹ and Plesner's memoirs suggest that his critical position originated in his Danish architectural education, especially the contribution of his stepfather Kaare Klint, architect and designer who accommodated Ulrik during the Second World War. The latter taught him pencil drawing, the observation of natural surroundings and landscapes, the careful use of materials, and the contractual cooperation with craftsmen to design reproducible typologies⁶⁰. The improvement of local skills in architectural design was a core goal of MAU and Plesner's main concern⁶¹.

Another seminal, but not revendedicated, influence could be traced to architect Kay Fisker, then professor at the Danish Royal Academy, who employed Plesner prior to his departure for India (1956–1958). In 1950, Fisker published in *Arkitekten* the essay 'The functional tradition' dedicated to the contemporary housing architecture of the San Francisco Bay Area⁶². He identified the foundations of an alternative modernism superseding the expressivity of monumentality and high-rise structures, instead emphasising the functionality of human-scale design and the exploration of non or partially industrialised materials and techniques. The vernacular wooden architecture of the Northwest Coast, which originated in the Midwest due to pioneer migration, created a 'functional tradition' at a regional scale that crosses national boundaries and finds parallels worldwide, notably in Scandinavia. Plesner's grounding of architectural design in local building crafts sensitively follows the same approach, where there is no historicist duplication but material attempts of recreating local crafts.

As previously mentioned, his sensitivity to vernacular-based design viewed as design resources inherits as well his extensive surveys of vernacular

⁵⁸ Dissanayake, Bartsch, and Scriver, 'Designing Sustainable Settlements in the Context of Megaprojects', 194.

⁵⁹ Nihal Perera, 'Critical Vernacularism, Multiple roots, cascades of thought, and the local production of architecture', in *Id. & Wing-Shing Tang, eds., Transforming Asian Cities: Intellectual Impasse, Asianizing Space, and Emerging Translocalities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 78–93.

⁶⁰ Plesner, *In Situ*, 25–27, 35.

⁶¹ Jayewardene, 'Mahaweli Development Programme, Sri Lanka', 33–39.

⁶² Kay Fisker, 'Den funktionelle tradition, Spredte indtryk af amerikansk arkitektur', *Arkitekten* 5–6 (1950), 69–100.

building typologies in Ceylon with his partner Geoffrey Bawa in the early 1960s⁶³. The enforcement of protectionist measures during the SLFP government (1960–1965) sought to promote contracts with local industries. In spite of his disapproval of SLFP’s democratic socialism, Plesner seized this opportunity to envision the redevelopment of local handicrafts and materials to mass-produce vernacular-inspired building components. His housing designs reflected this approach, as he collaborated with Bawa on several houses, including the Ena da Silva House (1961). The design features five inner courtyards with loggias, framed by a post-and-beam wooden structure supporting colonial Portuguese tiles, with the central garden inspired by the mada-midula, traditional Ceylonese inner courtyards⁶⁴.

Plesner expressed several times his opposition to Fry and Drew’s ‘tropical modernism’, a scientific adaptation of International architecture to tropical climates with which Bawa has sometimes been associated with⁶⁵. Plesner criticised it as a Western, technocratic engineering practice that disregarded local social conditions. He considered his role as a counter-model to the modern architect. According to him, the good architect must learn vernacular architecture, conduct on-site observations as a field-entrepreneur, and then design building typologies to assist local craftsmen and masons. However, Plesner shared with tropical modernism the investigation of vernacular bioclimatic design and low-cost prototyping for energetic and economic sustainability. For instance, his Bishop’s College for girls (1962) designed with Bawa in Colombo is typically tropical modernist with its concrete post-and-beam frame, its slightly overhanging flat roof on recessed soffits and the walls treated as perforated screens for natural ventilation on the upper storeys⁶⁶. Close to the right-wing United National Party officials, he was commissioned a series of corporate infrastructures and houses for officials in the 1960s in a similar architectural idiom⁶⁷. Plesner was entangled between his good connections with the government that

⁶³ Bawa, and Plesner, ‘Gamle Bygninger på Ceylon’, *Arkitekten*, 317–323.

⁶⁴ Poul Erik Skriver, ‘Arbejder på Ceylon’, *Arkitekten* 17 (1965), 348.

⁶⁵ Fello Atkinson, ‘The Genesis of Modern Tropical Architecture’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 117/5156, (1969), 546–561.

⁶⁶ Skriver, ‘Arbejder på Ceylon’,

⁶⁷ Plesner, *In Situ*, 87–107.

he hardly criticised and his strong friendship with Perera who was a left-wing political activist⁶⁸.

Relating his experience with Plesner, Perera further criticised tropical modernism for its Western-centred climatic reductionism. In contrast, he praised Plesner for his effort to integrate a Sri Lankan ‘critical vernacularism’ into the MAU towns, positioning it as a counter-model to Chandigarh and Brasília⁶⁹. Perera identifies critical vernacularism in the emergence of a post-independence Sri Lankan school of architecture during the 1970s. This movement pretended to shift away from modernism toward a closer integration of vernacular features in planning, materials, and climatic design, with Plesner recognised as one of its foremost initiators. According to Perera, Critical vernacularism uses ‘peoplehood’ as a resource for a designed-based response to the post-colonial initiatives of the capitalist production of architecture and town planning⁷⁰. Like Plesner, Perera blames tropical modernism for focusing only on the scientific aspect of bioclimatic design, ignoring the broader social and cultural habits of Sri Lankans, whose everyday life and living habits are not as centred on climate as tropical modernist architects believed. Critical vernacularism is closely related to the ‘modern regionalism’ that Sri Lankan architect Minette de Silva likely claimed for her architectural designs in the 1950s⁷¹. However, unlike similar concepts such as Kenneth Frampton’s ‘critical regionalism’ – which critiques as well architectural globalisation – Perera’s perspective diverges by intertwining decolonisation with nation-building through architecture.

Perera retrospectively formulated the ‘people-centred approach’⁷² to describe the involvement of settlers’ needs in the design process during the later years of the MAU. His position as a Sri Lankan gave him a better understanding of local habits than Plesner, whose expertise was primarily

⁶⁸ Bianco, *Interview with Nihal Perera*, 2.

⁶⁹ Perera, ‘Critical Vernacularism...’, 78–93.

⁷⁰ Nihal Perera, *Society and Space: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Postcolonial Identity in Sri Lanka* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 144.

⁷¹ Shiromi Pinto, ‘Minnette de Silva (1918–1998)’, *Architectural Review* (August 2019). Retrieve 22/01/2025.

⁷² Perera, ‘When Planning Ideas Land’, 141.

in urban design⁷³. Their complementarity articulated the latter's agreements from the authorities with Perera's interviews of settlers from Mahaweli and Gal-Oya. The 'people-centred approach' essentially worked as inductive and pragmatic in negotiating the integration of living functions of workers and their family in the planning process. In this period, Plesner was even less involved and acted as an intermittent consultant, rarely showing up in Sri Lanka, while Perera gradually took over the implementation of towns and housing. Plesner's contract ended in 1987.

Perera later described this 'people-centred approach' as a vector of decolonisation in town planning, emphasising an unplanned methodology from the bottom-up perspective of settlers that challenged both the post-colonial Western expertise⁷⁴ and the MDP top-down 'irrigation bureaucracy'⁷⁵. He later used the concept of the 'Right to the City' to provide a retrospective theoretical foundation for his architectural practice and positioned himself as an activist. He first encountered Lefebvre and other Western Marxist thinkers during his research stay abroad and his PhD at M.I.T., which he undertook after the Mahaweli programme. Coined by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in 1968 in an eponymous essay⁷⁶, the right to the city refers to the ability by marginalised groups to reclaim the socio-political production of urban space. Their collective use of those spaces intends to revert the commodification of cities by capitalist actors and 'produce' space from the bottom-up. Perera uses Lefebvre's epistemological framework to apprehend and historicise the social production and perception of space in post-colonial Sri Lanka. In *Society and Space* (1998), he revisits his attempt with Plesner to decolonise the architectural production through the critique of Western-imported modernism and the appraisal of a reborn 'critical vernacularism'⁷⁷. But this Marxist framework is merely absent in Plesner's opinions, who expressed strong disagreement toward any communist expertise and the anti-Western geopolitical alliances once promoted by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

⁷³ Bianco, *Interview with Nihal Perera*, 2.

⁷⁴ Perera, *Society and Space*, 217.

⁷⁵ Wickremeratne, 'The Rationale of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme', 9.

⁷⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

⁷⁷ Perera, *Society and Space*, 144–150.

Conclusion

The MDP had a significant impact on the economic development of Sri Lanka, that held in 2023 the highest GDP per capita of South Asia after the Maldives, with 3,828 \$⁷⁸. However, the MDP new towns can be retrospectively considered as a half-success. Several studies have highlighted the undermine of socialist welfare ideals in the 1980s, driven by the prioritisation of productivity through top-down expertise rather than social sustainability. This decline was further exacerbated by corruption, civil war, the deterioration of ethnic relations, and the impoverishment of farmers^{79 80}. Contrary to Plesner's expectations, the planned town centres became partly devitalised due to the partial displacement of shops from the urban cores to the peripheral main roads⁸¹. Yet, the spatial transformations of social uses were intended to be impelled by settlers themselves, and, as such, do not constitute a complete failure.

Plesner's position toward welfare planning in Sri Lanka was ambivalent. While he presumably maintained a largely ideologically neutral stance, his role was more managerial than technical, relying on his connections within the Sri Lankan state elite. Due to his synergy with Perera, he primarily acted as a maker of consensus and a mediator between the state apparatus, especially Gamini Dissanayake, and local stakeholders. Opposed to Bandaranaike's socialist and protectionist policies, Plesner praised liberal investments while simultaneously criticising tropical modernism and the MDP for its top-down bureaucracy. In his narrative, decolonisation – though rarely named as such – was framed through design and cultural perspectives rather than socio-economic ones.

The MDP exemplifies the intertwining of Western models with decolonisation on multiple levels: in spatial organisation and urban models, situated at the intersection of TVA principles and ancient Sinhalese settlements, and in architectural design, navigating between the climatic reductionism of

⁷⁸ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=8S&most_recent_value_desc=true> Accessed on 22/01/2025.

⁷⁹ Wickremeratne, 'The Rationale of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme', 25.

⁸⁰ Sørensen, *Relocated Lives...*, 247.

⁸¹ Dissanayake, Bartsch, and Scriver, 'Designing Sustainable Settlements in the Context of Megaprojects'.

tropical modernism and the cultural emphasis of vernacular regionalism. In Plesner's vision, efforts to redefine vernacular-based design were influenced by the seminal teachings of Klint and Fisker from his early period in Denmark. His role was finally to promote a narrative of 'vernacularisation' rather than designing the towns equally with his fellow draftsmen. Yet, his idealised recreation of indigenous architecture made a significant contribution to Sri Lanka's architectural culture.