Vitra
Design
Museum

Press Release

Geoffrey Bawa
Architecture for the Senses

26 September 2026–28 February 2027, Vitra Design Museum

With a career spanning five decades and over 200 projects, Geoffrey Bawa (1919–2003) was one of the most influential twentieth-century architects in Asia. His work blends the principles of modernism with the rich architectural history of Sri Lanka, forming a distinctive oeuvre that includes private houses, schools, hotels, and factories, as well as the country's parliament. This autumn, the Vitra Design Museum opens a major retrospective of the acclaimed architect's work. »Geoffrey Bawa: Architecture for the Senses« brings together over 250 exhibits, including drawings, models, furniture, historic footage, artworks, and photographs by Bawa. The exhibition also includes newly commissioned works by photographer Iwan Baan that capture the lived-in quality of some of Bawa's most iconic buildings. With a scenography designed by architect Lina Ghotmeh, the exhibition will transform the Vitra Design Museum into an immersive environment that evokes the sensual power of Bawa's practice.

Born in 1919 in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to a family of mixed Asian and European heritage, Bawa worked as a lawyer before retraining as an architect and graduating from the Architectural Association in London in 1957. Despite this relatively late start, Bawa became a leading voice in architecture in the newly independent Sri Lanka. Early projects like the St. Thomas' Preparatory School (1957–63) reveal the influence of Western modernism, however, throughout his career Bawa embraced local materials, craftsmanship, and industrial possibilities to form a unique architectural vocabulary sensitive to the context he was building in. Among Bawa's key works are his own garden estate Lunuganga (1948–2003), the Bentota Beach Hotel (1966–69), and the Kandalama Hotel (1991–94). In 2001 Bawa received the Aga Khan Chairman Award in recognition of his lifetime contribution to architecture.

For Bawa, good architecture had to make sense, both emotionally and practically. In line with his conviction that "architecture cannot be totally explained but must be experienced", he saw buildings not as static settings, but as unfolding spatial narratives in which Sri Lanka's monumental nature often plays a dramatic role. As seen in projects such as the Polontalawa Estate Bungalow (1963–67) and the Jayewardene House (1997–98), Bawa's buildings respond to the natural terrain, embracing existing elevations and contours while seamlessly incorporating rocks, trees, and landscape elements.

Another key focus of the exhibition is Bawa's close collaboration with some of Sri Lanka's leading artists and craftspeople, including Ena de Silva, Laki Senanayake, and Barbara Sansoni. These artists' workshops were run as social enterprises and played an important role in providing training and employment to local communities. Their batik panels, sculptures, and textiles were not merely decorative additions to Bawa's buildings, but integral components of their spatial experience, blurring the boundaries between architecture, art, and design.

Bawa has been labelled a pioneer of Tropical Modernism, but the exhibition will present a more multilayered perspective on Bawa's work than such simplifying etiquettes can suggest. By highlighting Bawa's engagement with collaboration, ecology, and the cultural context of architecture, the exhibition foregrounds him as an innovator of socially responsible and sustainable building practice, whose approaches are more relevant today than ever.

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The core of the show is formed by a vast selection of objects, models, and documents from the Geoffrey Bawa Trust, as well as archival images by Sebastian Posingis and Dominic Sansoni, with the addition of new photographs and films that provide a contemporary perspective on the intensity of Bawa's buildings and their powerful natural environments. A co-production of the Vitra Design Museum, the M+ museum of contemporary visual culture in Hong Kong, the German Wüstenrot Foundation, and the Geoffrey Bawa Trust, Geoffrey Bawa: Architecture for the Senses will first be presented at the Vitra Design Museum and then travel to Hong Kong, where it will be shown from June 2027. It will be accompanied by richly illustrated catalogue featuring essays, project descriptions, and interviews with architects Kengo Kuma, Tatiana Bilbao, Marina Tabassum, and Lina Ghotmeh.

General information

Exhibition title:	Geoffrey Bawa: Architecture for the Senses
Duration:	26 September 2026–28 February 2027
Curators:	Johan Deurell (Vitra Design Museum), Shayari de Silva (Geoffrey Bawa Trust), Ikko Yokoyama (M+, Hong Kong)
Assistant Curators:	Irina Selzer (Vitra Design Museum), Aneesha Mustachi (Geoffrey Bawa Trust), Iris Ng (M+, Hong Kong)
Exhibition Design:	Lina Ghotmeh — Architecture
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An exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum, M+, and the Wüstenrot Foundation, in collaboration with the Geoffrey Bawa Trust

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