

# ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY THESIS

“The contrasts between the work of Minnette de Silva and her perception due to male biases”

By

Noemi Ujhazy

6216846

Technical University of Delft

Tutors: Catja Edens/Sabina Tanovic

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## Introduction



Figure 1: Photograph of Minnette De Silva (RIBA Collections, 1951)

When I was in my first year of the bachelor's, I came across the Pieris House by Minnette De Silva when I was searching for an example of modernist vernacular architecture for an assignment. I fell in love with her drawings and the building, the sensibility of the design, the craftsmanship and details, while using modernist innovations. So, for me, Minnette first came as an architect, and only secondly as a woman, unlike for her contemporaries. After discovering her work and starting to read more about her life, I was devastated to realise how under-valued she was through history and how unjustly she was viewed by her

contemporaries. Even though, after her death, recently she has started to gain more interest and appreciation, Minnette and her work is still underrepresented in research. So, I, as someone who was so deeply captivated by her architecture, find it my calling to dive deeper into her world and give her justice through my thesis.

Therefore, with this research I explore the architectural work and gendered perception of Minnette de Silva (1918-1998), the first women architect of Sri Lanka with my research question being *What are the contrasts between the way Minnette de Silva presented herself through her buildings and writings, and the way she was understood by her fellow architects and colleagues?* Subquestions touch up on *What did the architecture scene of Sri Lanka look like, at the start of the career of Minnette de Silva, What are the main recurring architectural elements in the work of Minnette de Silva and how the ideas of CIAM are visible next to the traditional elements, What atmosphere and character Minnette de Silva creates through her work and What biases can be detected in the sources that describe her from the male perspective.* She was the pioneer of modernist architecture in Sri Lanka, while blending it with traditional elements to develop a so-called Modern Regionalism, later to be known as Critical Regionalism. Some of her key works, that I will also examine in this thesis, are the 'Karunaratne House, Kandy, 1951; Fernando House, Colombo, 1954; Pieris House, Colombo, 1956; Senanayake housing, Colombo, 1957; Public housing, Kandy, 1958; Amarasinghe House, Colombo, 1960; Coomaraswamy Twin Houses, Colombo, 1970; Arts Centre, Kandy, 1984'.

The importance of Minnette's work is often overshadowed by belittling anecdotes recalled by her male contemporaries. The records of her during her profession, are almost all written by men who encountered her in professional or personal circumstances. To counter this, I will first delve deeper into her architectural work, then contrast it with the above-mentioned male sources about her, uncovering the biases behind them. The method for this thesis is based on literature reviews and architectural analysis of Minnette's buildings. Firstly, when it comes to the situation of Sri Lanka during the time of Minnette de Silva, global and local history must be examined, to proceed to analyse and understand the architectural work of Minnette. Finally, when examining the gendered aspect of her perception and uncovering the biases behind her male contemporaries, the thesis takes a turn into social science as well.

*The life & work of an Asian woman architect* by Minnette De Silva is a primary source where she collects her architectural work, teachings, ideologies and life experiences in a scrap book style. The book showcases her architectural projects, which can be found in various other sources as well, however the personal narrative is unique and can only be found in this book. It is through a very subjective and personal lens, where one gets to know her life from the very beginning, family background, personal relationships throughout her life, what sparked her interest in architecture and her struggles in her life. She writes '*I was dismissed because I am a woman. I was never taken seriously for my work.*' (De Silva, 1998, p. 114). Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi takes an objective narrative of Minnette's life, work and teachings in her article *Crafting the archive: Minnette De Silva, Architecture, and History*. She writes in an objective way about the life and work of Minnette, also touching up on her academic work and first gives a historical background to the post independence Sri Lanka. However, she discusses only one of Minnette's buildings in detail, the Pieris house. Furthermore, while acknowledging the gendered aspect on Minnette's life, Siddiqi does not explore the different views on Minnette from her contemporary male colleagues, and the possible biases behind them.

In the following chapters, firstly, I will introduce the architectural scene in Sri Lanka, during the time of Minnette's entry to the field. Afterwards, the key works of Minnette will be discussed, with their recurring architectural elements and themes. Then, in the fourth section, Minnette's own narrative will be discussed, based on her autobiography. Finally, to show the contrasts, various sources about her from her contemporary male colleagues will be examined, uncovering the mainly gender-based biases behind them. As a conclusion, a summary of the findings will be provided, along with emphasising the significance of Minnette's work and further research directions proposed.

## 1. The Architecture Scene in Sri Lanka During Minnette de Silva's Early Career

In this chapter I will start by setting the scene with the British colonial influence in Sri Lanka, then subsequently the decolonization and rise of modernity, which coincides with the entry of Minnette to the architectural world.

In postcolonial South Asia architecture was much more than just the built environment, it was a political and societal tool to gain back identity and independence, after centuries of oppression. There has been records of continuous human settlements in Sri Lanka for more than two millennia, however, the island spent most of the past five centuries under the colonial rule of multiple European powers. First Sri Lanka came under Portugal rule, then the Dutch took over, and finally, the British concurred Sri Lanka, keeping control for around 150 years, until the islands independence finally in 1948 (*Arasaratnam et al.*, 2025).

The period after 1947/48 not only marked a new era of independence for Sri Lanka, but for the whole area of South Asia, with Pakistan, Bangladesh and India all becoming free from the Brits. At the same time modernism was on the rise in the West, which many architects in the freshly independent South Asian countries embraced as a tool to break free from colonial architecture and traces of Christian authority. Most of said architects trained in the West, then brought the modernist ideas with them and adapted it to local climate, culture and societal needs, Minnette de Silva being a pioneer in this regard. Even though, this could be seen as yet another 'colonization' – western modernist ideas taking over architecture in South Asia – the understanding of modernism or even brutalism were completely different. For example, the exposed concrete in brutalist structures in the West were interpreted as post-war melancholy, while in South Asia the traces of construction work left visible on the surface of concrete was a deliberate representation of the locally available means of production (*Lowry*, 2022), linking it strongly to craftsmanship, which is also a main aspect in Minnette de Silvas work.

The main source I studied for the paragraphs above, is the book *The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947-1985*. While providing indeed a great overview of the architectural scene of South Asia during this period, the book also supports my reasoning for this thesis, that Minnette is still not given enough credit to. Minnette is briefly mentioned in the introductory sections of the book, in the paragraphs dedicated to discussing the women that also shaped architecture at the time and area, however she is instantly being referred to as the 'close friend of Le Corbusier', rather than her own entity. Later, the book does dedicate a section to discuss Minnette's article, 'A House at Kendy, Ceylon' along with showing images and plans of one of her projects, the

Karunaratne House. However, the parts of the book that discuss regional modernism in Sri Lanka are fully dominated by the works of Geoffrey Bawa, and his associate Ulrik Plesner, even though Bawa came after Minnette, and Plesner actually went to work in Sri Lanka first for Minnette. Therefore, this book from 2022 still treats Minnette as just a nice accessory to the modernist architecture in Sri Lanka, rather than 'THE' architect who first introduced modernism as critical regionalism to this unique island.

This leads us to Minnette's entry to the scene. Minnette, born in 1918 in Kandy, Sri Lanka, was very much involved in the political and societal events of her home from a young age, due to her parents. Minnette's father, George E. De Silva, a practicing lawyer, was one of the leaders of the independence movement, and later the national government (*Siddiqi, 2017*). At the same time, her mother Agnes Nell, was a political force on her own right as well, for example fighting for the rights of the women of Sri Lanka to be able to vote and promoting the country's nascent arts and craft movement (*Siddiqi, 2017*). Therefore, Minnette grew up as a person highly sensitised to the happenings of her country, its minority groups – not just women, but local craftsman as well -, this sensitivity later playing a leading role in her architectural, intellectual and academic work.

Minnette's decision to be an architect happened at a young age, she describes "*My longing was to be an architect. How did I develop this?...Mr. Oliver Weerasinghe, the Town Planner came to visit my father one day on official work, and lent me some magazines. That, I believe, triggered the whole thing off.*" (*De Silva, 1998, p.59*), to which her father cynically reacted "*Women architects indeed!*" (*De Silva, 1998, p.59*). Still, she got into the London's Architectural Association (AAA) and successfully finished the education, later returning to Sri Lanka to contribute to the newly independent nation, establishing her own practice, while also becoming the first Asian woman to be made an Associate of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects). During her studies abroad and frequent travels, she not only got impacted by the wave of modernism but also made many connections in the western architectural world, attending multiple CIAM meetings as well. In *figure 2* we can see Minnette attending the 1947 CIAM conference – front row, 8th person from the right -, showcasing her involvement in modernism. Looking at the picture, it is striking, how from the 75 participants on the photograph, there are only 12 women, including Minnette. Furthermore, she is the only one on the photograph, who is not wearing western clothes, but the traditional outfit of her culture.



*Figure 2: C.I.A.M Conference 1947, Bridgwater, Somerset (RIBA Collections, 1947)*

Therefore, as she started her practice in Sri Lanka, everything was set in place for her to combine the western ideas of modernism, with the local needs of her people and traditional elements, promoting local craftsmanship also as a tool to regain the identity of the freshly independent Sri Lanka.

## 2. Key Architectural Elements in Minnette de Silva's Work

In this chapter I investigate the key architectural works of Minnette de Silva through comparative analysis, to uncover the recurring themes of her works and the way she blended modernism with the traditional craftsmanship of Sri Lanka. I selected six important buildings, based on how well documented they are, while also providing a timeline to her career, with including the first and last major project she did. First, I provide a short description to each project, followed by analysis.

### *Karunaratne House, Kandy, 1951*

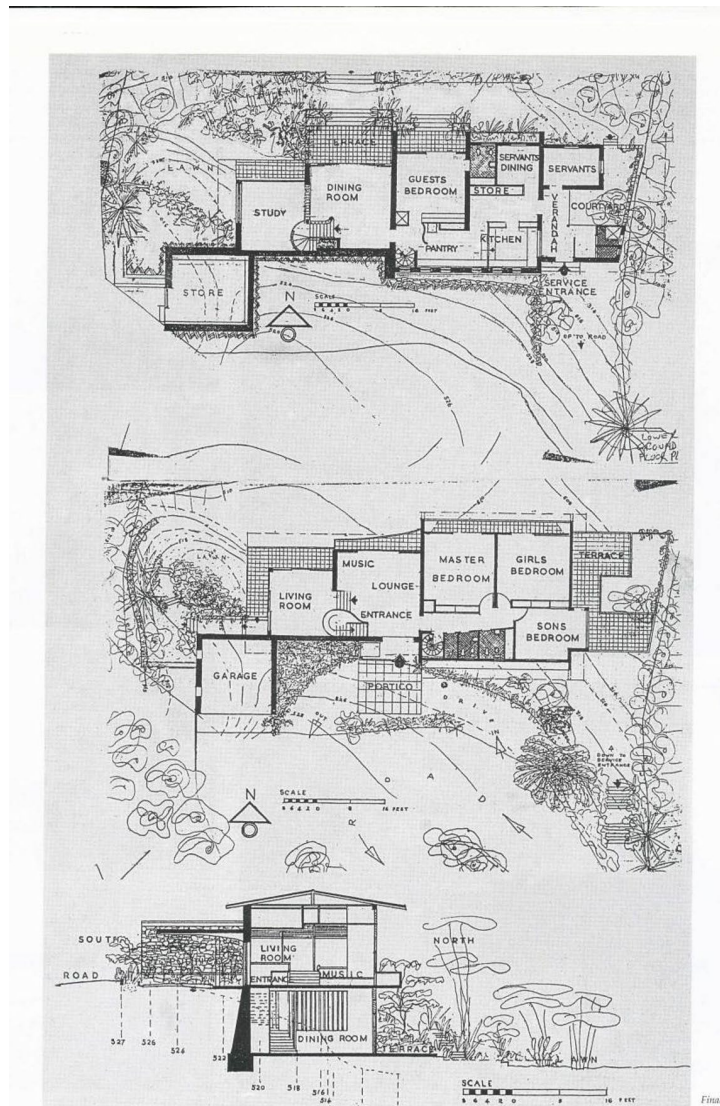


Figure 3: Karunaratne House drawings (Minnette de Silva, 1948)

Not only was the Karunaratne House the first project by Minnette, it was also the first home ever to be designed by a woman in Sri Lanka.

The house is situated on a hillside; therefore, the configuration of the rooms is in close relation with the slope of the context (see figure 3). Special attention was placed on the response to the local climate as well.

First, large scepticism welcomed the project, however, after completion it was referred to as 'ultra modern but not bereft of local flavour' (Architectuul., 2019c).

Now scheduled for demolition.

### *Pieris House, Colombo, 1956*

With the Pieris House – her first commission in Colombo - Minnette further perfected the blend of modernism with traditional elements, while also responding to the local climate and incorporating her typical elements such as central staircase and courtyard room (see figure 4). The building is often referred to as a ‘prototype for contemporary living in a tropical city’ (Architectuul., 2019d).

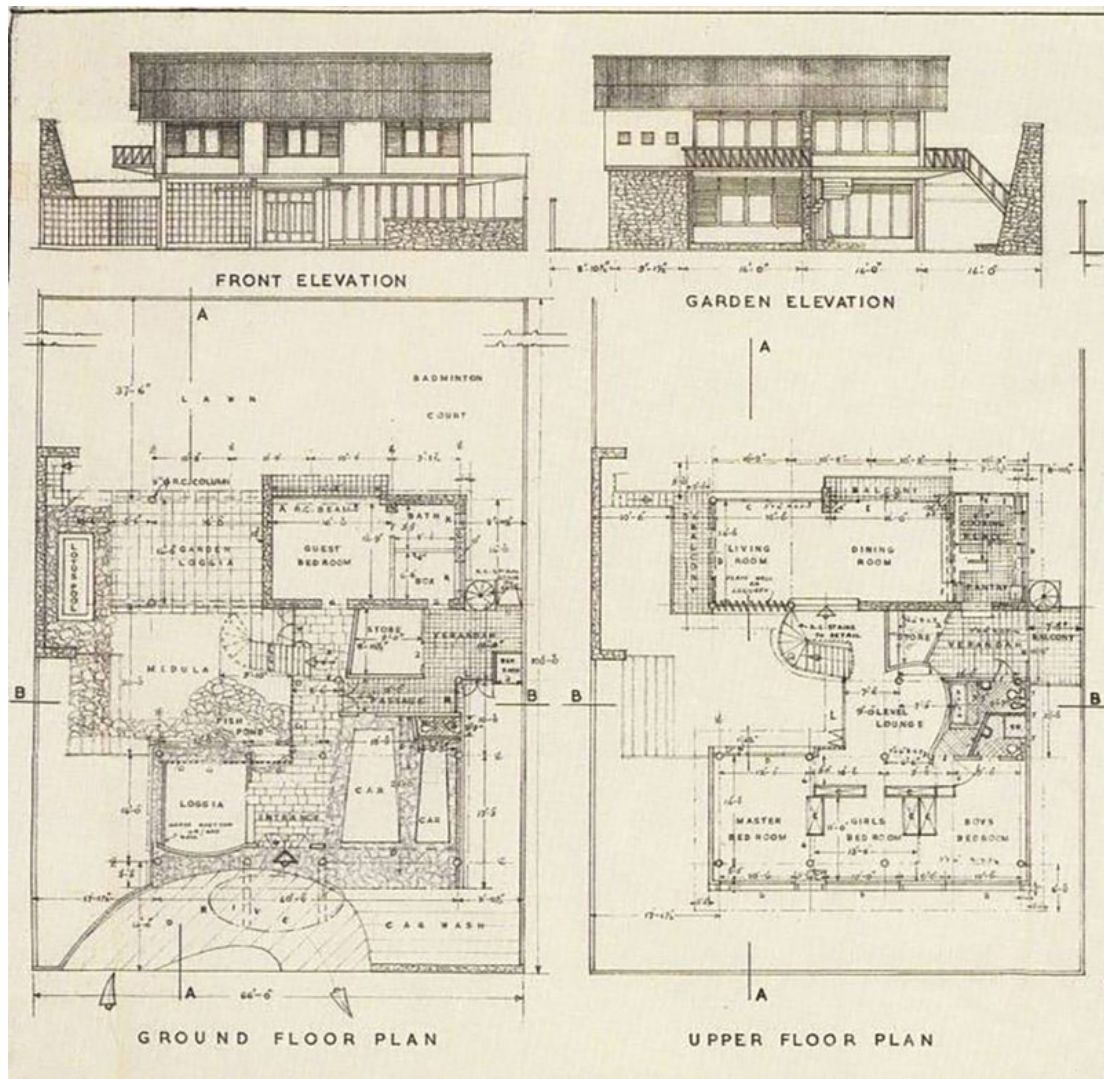
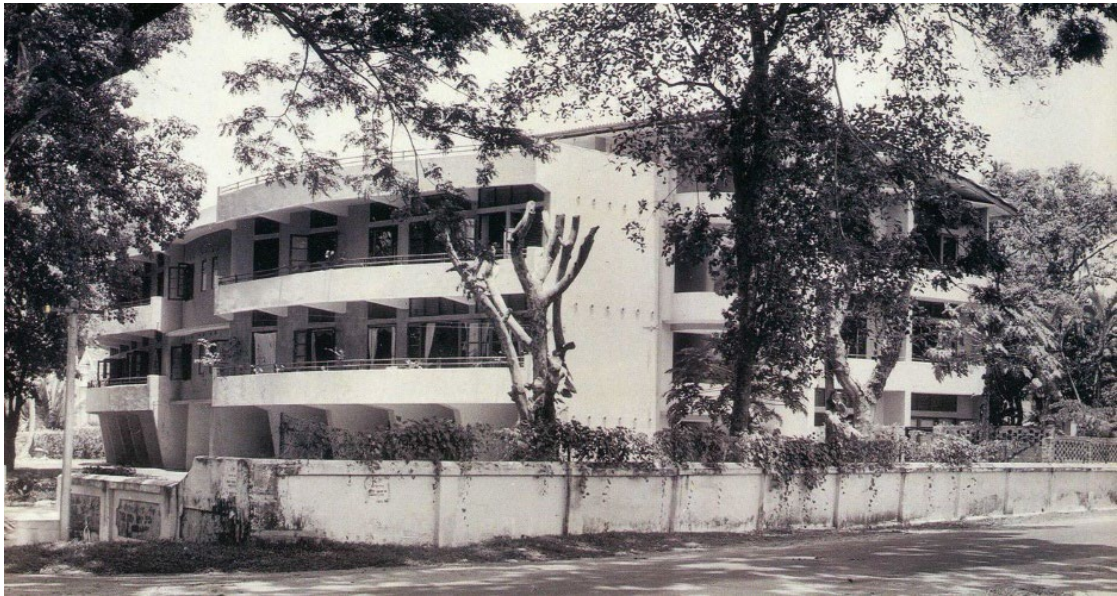


Figure 4: Pieris House drawings (Minnette de Silva, 1952)

### *Senanayake housing, Colombo, 1957*

The Senanayake housing can be considered one of Minnette's most apparently modernist designs, with its curved facade (see *figure 5*), and closely following the Dwelling Manual by Le Corbusier from 'Towards an Architecture' (Architectuul., 2019e). An interesting feature is how even though the building contained ten different apartments, Minnette successfully incorporated to them elements from her previous private villa designs, such as multiple interior courtyards.



*Figure 5: Photograph of Senanayake housing (Architectuul., 2019)*

### *Amarasinghe House, Colombo, 1960*



*Figure 6: Photograph of Amarasinghe House (Architectuul., 2019a)*

In figure 6 an old-fashioned lounge can be seen in the Amarasinghe House with the craftsmanship of the timber frames casting beautiful shadows, emphasizing how Minnette de Silva fit the traditional habits in a modernist setting. Unfortunately, the building was demolished in 2011 (Architectuul., 2019a).

### *Coomaraswamy Twin Houses, Colombo, 1970*

The Coomaraswamy Thin Houses are one of Minnette's most celebrated works, successfully blending modernist and local elements (see figure 7). The biggest testament to its success is how even one of her main rivals, Geoffrey Bawa was known for 'dropping in occasionally for a drink, simply because he admired the house and enjoyed sitting in its cavernous living room' (Architectuul., 2019f). Unfortunately, still demolished.

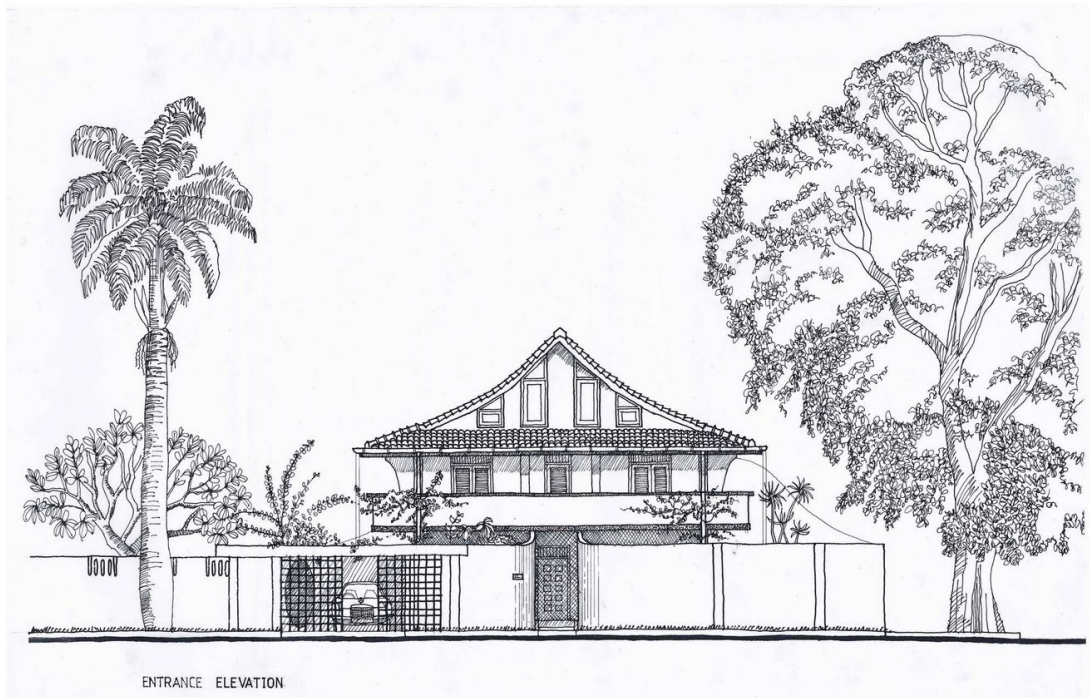


Figure 7: Coomaraswamy Twin Houses drawing (Minnette de Silva, 1970)

### *Arts Centre, Kandy, 1984*

One of Minnette's last major commissions was a performance centre for the Kandy Arts Association (see figure 8). Unfortunately, she faced many challenges such as constant changes of the brief, technical problems of the construction and lack of experienced staff to work under her (Architectuul., 2019b).

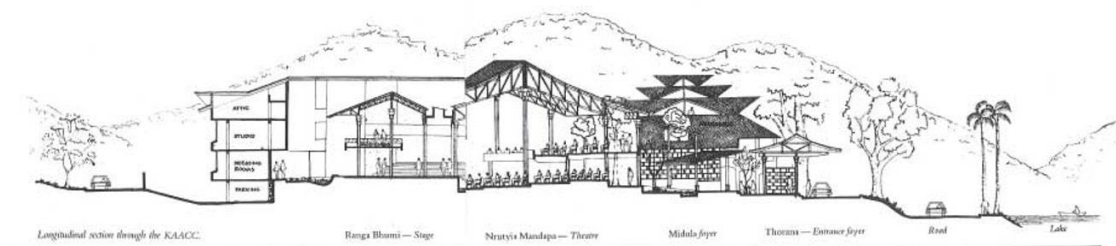


Figure 8: Arts Centre drawing (Minnette de Silva, 1984)

After analysing the above mentioned six projects through various written sources, images and original architectural drawings (if available), I collected the most significant terms to describe each project and made a word cloud from them, to see which are the most recurring terms (see figure 9).



Figure 9: Word cloud based on the recurring themes in Minnette de Silva's work (self made)

One of the signature elements in all her works is the courtyard room. Either it is one central courtyard, a sequence of multiple courtyards or use of courtyards for circulation and services, in some form they are always present. Vernacular form of courtyards historically used to be a national spatial model of Sri Lanka, reflecting the climate and social customs of the island (Perera, 2023). However, during the colonial period, the courtyard model slowly disappeared due to the import of western architecture. Since Minnette re-introduced the courtyard model, it became a model for many architects in Sri Lanka after her, such as Geoffrey Bawa. Another spatial element coming back in her designs is the central staircase with often a curved sweep, referring to modernist forms. The central staircase theme usually appears in the private residential houses she built and serves as the primary means to connect all spaces with each other.

Regarding materiality, concrete is appearing in all the projects as a main construction element – either in forms of columns or slabs – showcasing her ties

to modernity and aspiration for new technologies. However, she always pairs concrete with local materials, such as timber, kabook – a local tree also called as kapok) or rough stone. She understood where to properties of concrete work the best for her advantage, such as in the load-bearing structure, and where local materials enhance the craftsmanship.

Craftsmanship is another always apparent aspect in her designs. She always worked together with local craftsmen, valuing their knowledge and with their help bringing back local motives to modern architecture. With such a close involvement of the local craftsmen, Minnette's return to the vernacular was not a shallow attempt for ornaments, but a true contribution to uplifting society. Her projects provided work to the previously, during colonial times, marginalised group of craftsmen. They could return to practicing their craft, making a livelihood and reviving the identity of the post-colonial Sri Lanka.

Finally, climate responsiveness is another aspect that receives special attention in her projects. It is important to mention, how colonial architects easily neglected this aspect as they tried to bring Western houses to the extremely different climate of Sri Lanka. Minnette on the other hand, with her deep understanding of the island, returned to acknowledging the importance of local climate. The often-employed shaded verandas provide sun protection, and the interlocking spaces not only achieve a nice flow of movement but also facilitate ventilation. She also considered tree planting as a strategy for climate control to help keep the apartments cooler over the year. Additionally, she regularly incorporated perforated grills for ventilation, where she merged climate responsiveness with craftsmanship, as the grills were hand crafted from wrought iron. The wrought iron grills often featured the local motive of bo-leaf (see figure



Figure 10: Wrought-iron grille with bo-leaf motif in the Amarasinghe House (Dissanayake, 1982)

10). The bo-leaves have special significance in Buddhists culture, the predominant religion of Sri Lanka, and are even featured on the flag of the country, symbolizing purity and enlightenment (*Sri Lanka Flag: Symbolism of the Lion & Bo Leaves Explained*, 2023).

Therefore, this is another testament of how the craftsmanship in Minnette's architecture served a wider, national purpose of returning to local symbols after the colonial period.

Getting from the world cloud the most frequent themes in Minnette's architecture, provided me a base for defining six categories, on which each of the six buildings introduced at the start of this chapter. The categories are load bearing structure; space defining elements; materiality; climate control; modernist elements; craftsmanship. With the six categories I created a table which provides an overview and comparative analysis of the buildings, also adding an aspect of time and how Minnette's style changed over her career, if it changed at all, or what are the most constant themes.

	<i>Karunaratne House</i>	<i>Pieris House</i>	<i>Senanayake Housing</i>	<i>Amarasinghe House</i>	<i>Coomarswamy Twin Houses</i>	<i>Arts Centre</i>
<i>Year</i>	1951	1956	1957	1960	1970	1984
<i>Location</i>	Kandy	Colombo	Colombo	Colombo	Colombo	Kandy
<i>Load bearing Structure</i>	Concrete columns, Trussed rafters	Insitu concrete slabs with concealed beams	Concrete	Concrete columns, Walls	Concrete columns, Walls	Concrete columns, Timber trusses
<i>Space Defining Elements</i>	Central staircase, Courtyard, Moveable panels	Central staircase, Courtyard	Inner access courts, Central service courts, Courtyards	Courtyard, Sliding screens	Central staircase,	Multiple pavilions
<i>Materiality</i>	Concrete, Glass, Rubble, Brick, Timber	Concrete, Kabook, Rough stone	Concrete,	Concrete, Kabook, Rough stone, Glass, Coconut wood	Concrete, Timber	Concrete, Timber
<i>Climate Control</i>	Shaded verandas, Orientation, Interconnected spaces	Shaded verandas, Perforated grilles, Glass louvres	Strategic tree planting	Perforated grilles, Interconnected spaces	Shaded continuous balcony	Over-sailing roofs
<i>Modernist Elements</i>	Concrete, Interconnected spaces, Functionalism	Concrete, Raised off the ground	Concrete, Curving facade, Following Dwelling Manual by Le Corbusier	Concrete, Interconnected spaces, Raised off the ground, Open plan	Concrete, Curving walls, Interconnected spaces, Tripple height living space	Interconnected spaces
<i>Craftsmanship</i>	Terracotta tiles, Lacquer work, Dumbara weaving	Lacquer work, Decorative wrought iron, Woven mats	No data	Decorative wrought iron, Wooden framework	Roof tiles, Wooden framework	Roof tiles, Wooden framework

To conclude, zooming into these examples revealed much of Minnette's understanding of architecture as both craft and utility. She was a designer with integrity, who did not blindly follow current trends, such as modernism, but in an extremely careful way, selected the features that her designs can benefit the most from, and applied them in the most strategic points, such as concrete columns for load bearing. She not only wanted her clients to benefit from her projects but also took these constructions to benefit multiple, often marginalised, local groups in her community, such as craftsmen, artists and weavers. Finally, she was strong in developing an own architectural language and developing key features that she would perfect over the course of multiple projects, such as the theme of courtyards, which inspired many architects in Sri Lanka, that came after her. It can be said that she was a visionary of her era and a trend-setter in Sri Lanka.

### 3. Narratives and Biases: The Male Perspective on Minnette de Silva

Now, with a more truthful image through her architecture on Minnette de Silva as a professional, it is inviting to examine how her male contemporaries reacted to her in an age where society struggled to take a woman seriously, simply because of their gender. In this chapter multiple male perspectives on Minnette will be examined, searching for potential biases behind them. Finally, it will be assessed how these biases impact her legacy.

The most well documented narrative on her is from Ulrik Plesner, a Danish architect who came to work to Sri Lanka for Minnette, then later collaborated with other local architects. Plesner describes his time with Minnette in his memoir, *In Situ*, where he uses no filter in his opinion, not even trying to hide his misogyny. When I opened his book, I was shocked to read in one of the first paragraphs about Minnette that his reasoning to agree working for Minnette, a professional architect, his boss, was the following: *'Minette was good-looking, which was the most important thing, so I agreed in five minutes.'* (Plesner, 2013, p.55). From the first moment, Plesner never looked at her as an architect, but as the desirable woman. The memoir progressively gets worse, with barely any take on Minnette's architecture, rather on her appearance: *'I saw a beautiful figure in a gold-edged green silk sari...'* (Plesner, 2013, p.57) or *'The many mornings she appeared with a fresh jasmine flower behind her ear, made me think of an Indian sculpture come alive'* (Plesner, 2013, p.58). At this point the descriptions turn into a stereotypical fetishization of Asian woman by Western men.

After these 'flattering' descriptions, the memoir soon takes a bitter turn, as Plesner realises that Minnette is her own person and does not take him immediately as an equal in their work – which is obvious, as Plesner was supposed to work under Minnette from the start, his position was even called as

Minnette's 'foreign expert' – he writes '*The work was disappointing*' (Plesner, 2013, p.66). He then quit and left to work with other architects in Sri Lanka, such as Geoffrey Bawa. From then on, his description of Minnette completely changed, he describes her as someone with a lack of charm, lack of humour and goes on with anecdotes of how they ridiculed Minnette between themselves with other male architects, such as Geoffrey Bawa: '*Geoffrey Bawa once claimed when driving toward Colombo that he knew that Minnette was in town, judging by the heavy stream of cars leaving*' (Plesner, 2013, p.67). This anecdote is quite contradictory, as while Plesner was still smitten with Minnette, he described that '*... villages of dancers and weavers and lacquer makers, all of which received her as a respected friend.*' (Plesner, 2013, p.66). It is also important to note, that Geoffrey Bawa was one of Minnette's biggest rivals. He started practicing after Minnette already established herself and developed her signature style. While Minnette's first built project dates to 1951 (Karunaratne House), and many of her buildings, where she continued defining her style, were built during the 50's, Bawa's career only took off from the very end of the 50's/ early 60's. It can be said that Bawa 'took inspiration' from Minnette's work, still he got all the credits for it, simply because as a man he did not have to struggle with not being taken seriously. The biggest testament to this, is how Bawa was awarded a Sri Lanka Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 1982, which Minnette received only in 1996, two years before her death (Corry, 2022). The biggest irony is how Bawa took Plesner straight from Minnette's office to work with him and it is known that Plesner took many of Minnette's ideas with him.

However infuriated I was, while reading Plesner's memoir, I am extremely glad he wrote it in such honesty to his thoughts and feelings, as this way I have a much better understanding about what Minnette had to go through in her age when a woman could never be looked at as an architect by other men, only as a woman. Just like Minnette admits in her autobiography: '*I was dismissed because I am a woman. I was never taken seriously for my work.*' (De Silva, 1998).

Another, more ambiguous view on Minnette is by Le Corbusier. Their relationship is mentioned in many sources, also in Minnette's autobiography. In the book *Le Corbusier: architect and feminist*, in a brief chapter Minnette and Le Corbusier's relationship is also described, mainly through their correspondence. They met through both of their involvement in CIAM and a strong friendship was formed, with them exchanging letters for years. On one hand Le Corbusier acknowledges her work and applauds for it, but on the other hand primarily focuses her as The idealistic, exotic, Asian woman. Once again, what started as two architects meeting through professional circles is described in the following way: '*Le Corbusier was taken with her beauty and they began a friendship that lasted until his death.*' (Samuel, 2004, p. 89). Emphasising Minnette as a beautiful woman,

rather than fellow architect. This is further enhanced with a quote from one of Le Corbusier's letters to Minnette: *'Your image is always in front of me – you who carry two thousand years of beauty and traditional wisdom in a bearing that really moves me.'* (Samuel, 2004, p.89). However, it has to be stated that Le Corbusier was one of the only men among her contemporary architects, that actually acknowledged and celebrated her work, with referring to her buildings as 'excellent' (Samuel, 2004, p.89). This shows that Le Corbusier, an established architect, while admiring Minnette's beauty, did not feel threatened by her as a professional, was not insecure, unlike Plesner and Bawa.

Minnette's relationship with Le Corbusier rather has implications to her legacy. Throughout the years, it was often speculated whether their relationship was only a friendship, or a manifested romantic union. Often people seem to be more interested in Minnette as the potential lover of a famous architect, rather than an architect on her own right. I experienced this first hand, as at the university when I talk with people, no one knows about Minnette, but then her name came up between me and an Indian student, who was one of the only ones to know her, but his first sentence was about how there is so much rumour that Minnette was involved with Le Corbusier.

Another example, showcasing how Minnette's relationship with Le Corbusier implicates her legacy, is the book called Plastic Emotions by Shiromi Pinto published in 2019. Plastic Emotions advertises itself as a book that is to review the story of the 'forgotten feminist icon' Minnette de Silva, based on her autobiography (*Plastic Emotions — Influx Press*, n.d.), but taking a fictional narrative, with many events and even buildings not from real life. However, the problem is that the book actually focuses on painting a fictional love story of Minnette and Le Corbusier, actually contributing to diminishing Minnette as an architect and portraying her as a love-sick, pining woman obsessed with Le Corbusier. Luckily, reading reviews about the book, it is apparent that I am not the only one outraged by this narrative on her. Here are a few examples, that give back my faith that at least in our age people do realize on how many levels this story is disrespecting her:

*'...the focus seems to be more on Corbusier than it does Minnette, who's at best depicted as the sort of "woman behind every great man" and at worst like a side character.'* (Goodreads, n.d.)

*'...the description of minnette as a "forgotten feminist icon" feels ironic to me as much of the book put a larger focus onto le corbusier and modern architecture and took away from minnette's own life and accomplishment...'* (Goodreads, n.d.)

*'The Wikipedia article about de Silva was more inspiring than this book - this book painted de Silva as an accommodated and plain woman defined by her affair with a famous man, when she had done much more.'* (Goodreads, n.d.)

David Robson architect and writer, who personally knew Minnette, was also heavily opposing the picture Pinto painted of her in her book, he writes *'My problem is that Pinto's Minnette bears little resemblance to the Minnette that I knew and she fails completely to explain the significance of her architecture'* (Robson, 2020b) showing that luckily there are male perspectives on Minnette without the usual biases. While I believe Shiromi Pinto has the right to write about whatever she wants, especially if it is declared to be partially fiction, what upsets me the most is how even today it is easier to access a romantic fiction about Minnette and Le Corbusier, than reading Minnette's own autobiography *The life & work of an Asian woman architect*, where she has the chance to tell her own truth. On this note, I am still convinced, that Minnette deserves so much more research and attention, and in general how there is room for improvement even today in acknowledging women architects to their true worth.

## Conclusion

To recap my findings, I will answer the sub questions which lead to answering the main research question presented in the introduction.

As diving deeper in the history of Sri Lanka and Minnette de Silva, I discovered that the main characteristic of the architectural scene in Sri Lanka during the entry of Minnette, was a post-colonial search for new identity while reconnecting with the traditions and culture of the freshly independent island. The architecture of Minnette also sparks from this, with her efficiently using the modernist elements where they fit her design the most – such as concrete for loadbearing structure, interconnected spaces and open plans -, while incorporating traditional elements, such as central courtyards, local materials for roofs and window frames, craftsmanship, and climate appropriate solutions, instead of western building ideals. With this combination of modernism and vernacular, her architecture breathes a very much needed fresh air to the post-colonial Sri Lanka, creating an atmosphere of new, interesting and open spaces, while reconnecting with tradition through the craftsmanship of the detailing, giving people homes that they can connect to and their identity aligns with. On the other, her male contemporaries looked at her as a woman, never the architect. Their biases are highly due to the sexism of the age – some of which unfortunately still remains – where a woman could not be professionally taken seriously. These biases are often heightened by the physical attraction these men expressed towards Minnette, therefore, they placed her looks and

attractiveness before her professional skills when perceiving her. Finally, professional jealousy can also be detected for example in the case of Geoffrey Bawa, who took multiple of Minnette's ideas for himself, talking in a degrading manner about her as read in Ulrik Plesner's memoir, but secretly admiring her architecture, such as the Coomaraswamy Twin houses. The answer to the main research question *What are the contrasts between the way Minnette de Silva presented herself through her buildings and writings, and the way she was understood by her fellow architects and colleagues?* could be summarized by that for Minnette her architecture came before everything else, but for everyone else she was a woman before an architect. She used architecture in a sensible and innovative way to help regain the identity of Sri Lanka, while her male colleagues constantly discredited her due to being a woman. When these men describe her as a difficult, stubborn woman who argues with everyone, but at least is attractive, Minnette was in truth someone with a strong vision who fought for what she believed was right. Would you call a male architect, who has innovative visions and sticks with them through no matter what, a difficult man?

Minnette de Silva is definitely not the only woman architect in history who was not given enough credit, therefore, I would highly encourage further comparative research on other woman architects as well. Feminism today is just as relevant as ever, especially with looking at the current political scene of the world, which is full of examples how quickly misogyny can be on the rise again. Architecture is also a field, where due to the achievements of feminist movements, women gradually got more and more say, but this achievement has to be kept alive with constant effort, research and mindfulness, to which this thesis also aims to contribute.

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