

# open house colombo

## Gardens and Green Spaces 23–24 and 30–31 March 2024

Open House Colombo is part of a worldwide Open House network dedicated to making architecture and design more accessible through festivals and events. Open House Worldwide spotlights unique urban architecture through interactive means, namely offering information about and entry to spaces that might otherwise be more challenging to access. The Geoffrey Bawa Trust has been the local organiser for Open House since its first Colombo edition in 2022. Open House Colombo has since featured buildings by architects including Geoffrey Bawa, Minnette de Silva, Justin Samarasekera, Panini Tennekoon, and Valentine Gunasekara.

In keeping with the themes of “To Lunuganga,” the Trust’s multi-season celebration of the garden’s 75th anniversary, the theme of Open House Colombo 2024 is “Gardens and Green Spaces.” The 2023 Open House programme featured the same theme in Bentota, opening up spaces including Lunuganga, the Ena de Silva House, Boutique 87, Heritage Ayurveda, and Bevis Bawa’s Brief Garden. We are thrilled to bring this theme to Colombo, where hidden green spaces abound if you know where to look!

For more information, please visit the following links:

Registration: [bit.ly/ohc2024](https://bit.ly/ohc2024)

Geoffrey Bawa Trust Events: [geoffreybawa.com/events](https://geoffreybawa.com/events)

Open House Colombo Webpage: [openhouseworldwide.org/colombo](https://openhouseworldwide.org/colombo)

Be sure to follow us at [@openhousecolombo](https://www.instagram.com/openhousecolombo) and [@geoffreybawatrust](https://www.instagram.com/geoffreybawatrust) on Instagram!

## Preparation

Open House days are great fun, but can be long and require lots of time spent outdoors—especially for this special “green spaces” edition! We recommend that you:

- Stay hydrated: Bring your own water bottle.
- Protect yourself from the sun: Wear a hat or cap and apply sunscreen.
- Account for rain: Pack an umbrella.
- Avoid mosquito bites: Spray bug repellent.
- Dress for the occasion: Choose comfortable clothing and sturdy footwear.

## Schedule

For information about open access and tour times, visit our Eventbrite: [bit.ly/ohc2024](https://bit.ly/ohc2024)

### Weekend I: 23<sup>rd</sup>–24<sup>th</sup> March

PROPERTIES	ARCHITECT	OPEN DATE	ADDRESS
De Soysa House	Geoffrey Bawa	23 <sup>rd</sup> March	<a href="#">61/5, Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo 07</a>
Saara Nilla	Amila de Mel	23 <sup>rd</sup> March	<a href="#">30/8, 6th Lane, Colombo 05, Kirulapone</a>
Gordon Gardens	Sir Arthur Gordon	24 <sup>th</sup> March	<a href="#">President's House, Janadhipathi Mawatha, Colombo 01</a>
Lakmahal Community Library	Unknown	24 <sup>th</sup> March	<a href="#">8A Alfred House Road, Colombo 03</a>
Cathedral of Christ the Living Saviour	T.N. Wynne-Jones and Wilson Peiris	24 <sup>th</sup> March	<a href="#">368 / 3A, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07</a>

### Weekend II: 30<sup>th</sup>–31<sup>st</sup> March

PROPERTIES	ARCHITECT	OPEN DATE	ADDRESS
Ishq Colombo	Channa Daswatte	30 <sup>th</sup> March	<a href="#">17/2, Alfred Place, Colombo 03</a>
MJF Centre West	Unknown	30 <sup>th</sup> March	<a href="#">No. 340, Galle Main Road, Katubedda, Moratuwa</a>
Borella Cemetery	Unknown	31 <sup>st</sup> March	<a href="#">475, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 08</a>
Cathedral of Christ the Living Saviour	T.N. Wynne-Jones and Wilson Peiris	31 <sup>st</sup> March	<a href="#">368 / 3A, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07</a>

## De Soysa House



**Address:** [61/5, Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo 07](#)

Opposite Habib Bank (70 Srimath Anagarika Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo 03) and just after the Alwis Place turn-off.

**Public Transport:**

The Dharmapala Mawatha bus stop (145, 175, 177) is just outside the home.

**Parking is not available.**

**Architect:** Geoffrey Bawa

**Client:** Chloe and Cecil de Soysa

**Year:** 1985–1991

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:

Sebastian Posingis

The de Soysa House was designed for artist Chloe de Soysa and her husband Cecil, who deemed their family home too large after their children departed. Positioned right next to the family home, Geoffrey Bawa oriented his design of the house around Chloe's preexisting furniture. Bawa was a close friend of the de Soysa family and thus a frequent visitor to the house; Chloe's daughter Sharya fondly recalls Bawa bringing her a bundle of peacock feathers from Lunuganga because of how much she loved them.

A stairwell displaying an impressive gallery wall of art from the '43 Group leads to the rest of the home, which contains a study, dining area, bedroom, bathroom, living room, and rooftop garden. Although this home was designed closer to the end of Bawa's career, it still contained architectural experimentation. The de Soysa House was Bawa's first experiment with steel, as seen in the large windows that bring light into the space. Satisfied with the result, Bawa then used steel in his now-iconic Kandalama Hotel project.

Chloe herself is responsible for the greenery that filled the garden spaces Bawa created in the home, which Sharya noted were especially life-sustaining during COVID, as they ensured she "never felt cloistered or closed in."

## Saara Nilla



**Address:** [30/8, 6th Lane, Colombo 05, Kirulapone.](#)  
Off D. M. Colombage Mawatha.

**Public Transport:** The Kirulapone railway station (multiple trains) and Open University bus stop (176) are nearby. Turning on to 6th Lane from Colombage Mawatha will lead directly to Saara Nilla.

**Parking is not available.**

**Architect:** Amila de Mel

**Garden Design:** Kasana Viyrapuma

**Client:** Thusitha and Hiran Jayasundera

**Year:** 2022

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:  
Anusha Attygalle

Saara Nilla is a multipurpose, regenerative community space started by Sri Lankan-born, United Kingdom-based actress Thusitha Jayasundera. It is a living tribute to Jayasundera's brother Hiran, a lawyer, linguist, and human rights activist who passed away at 50. This plot of privately-owned land was originally conceptualised as a permaculture garden, but the fuel shortages of 2022 led to the building of a community kitchen for pregnant mothers and young children. It later expanded to include a library/reading room and English Language Acquisition Centre (ELAC).

Saara Nilla is the country's first privately-owned ELAC and currently has about 25 members. Rather than charge fees for immersive English sessions and other resources, Saara Nilla invites parents and children to "pay back" by coming up with ways to improve and expand activities on-site.

The garden contains a mix of vegetables (kangkung, tomato, chilli, okra, onion), herbs (lemongrass, curry leaves, gotu kola), and fruits (mango, banana, papaya). Based on the "Metta Garden" concept, the garden is designed as a self-sustaining ecosystem that employs innovative methods of upcycling—such as a fully-functional water well that uses a bicycle wheel as a lever—in accordance with the space's philosophy. Saara Nilla accepts donations and welcomes volunteers to carry on its work.

## Gordon Gardens



**Address:** [President's House](#)  
[Janadhipathi Mawatha,](#)  
[Colombo 01](#)

**Public Transport:** The nearest bus stop is Fort York (168).

**Parking is not available.**

**Garden Designer:**  
Sir Arthur Gordon  
**Client:** Queen Victoria  
**Year:** 1887

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:  
© Rita McIntosh, 1930,  
Flickr Creative Commons license

Gordon Gardens takes its name from British governor Sir Arthur Gordon, who converted the three-acre piece of land into a garden in acknowledgement of Queen Victoria's 1887 Golden Jubilee. Trees, flowers, and fountains form the garden's landscape; a marble statue of Queen Victoria that originally crowned the space has since been moved.

The site of the garden contains its own storied history, undergoing Portuguese, Dutch, and British occupation. The 95-acre piece of land upon which the three-acre garden rests accordingly served several iterations including acting as the site of two churches, a cemetery, and a playing field for cricket and football matches.

Gordon Gardens originated as a public garden—actually designated the first of its kind in Colombo at the time. The garden functioned as a public park until 1980, when it was placed under the jurisdiction of the President's House. Gordon Gardens no longer allows public access.

## Lakmahal Community Library



**Address:** [8A Alfred House Road](#)  
[Colombo 03](#)

**Public Transport:**

The Bambalapitiya Junction bus stop (multiple buses) is a ten-minute walk away.

**Parking is not available.**

**Architect:** Unknown

**Client:** Cyril Leonard Wickremesinghe

**Year:** Built 1937;  
renovated 2019–2021

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:  
Rajiva Wijesinha

Lakmahal originated as a family home for the Wickremesinghe family before evolving into a library and community space. The house was commissioned by Cyril Leonard Wickremesinghe and his wife Esme (née Moonemalle Goonewardene), the latter of whom lived in Lakmahal until her passing in 1994.

The house's title emerged from the practice of naming large colonial homes, though the family wanted one that sounded "more Sri Lankan," borrowing from "Lanka" and "Taj Mahal" to create "Lakmahal." One wall of family photos in the library defines the separation between the public space and the private home that still exists as part of the much larger initial property before it was divided among its third-generation owners. When making the division, avoiding compromising the architecture was of significant priority.

Lakmahal Community Library's founder, Anisha Dias Bandaranaike, sought to create a gathering space in Colombo that encouraged reading, education, and community. In addition to study areas and shelves of books available for checkout, Lakmahal maintains a robust events calendar. The library does accept book donations.

Lakmahal Community Library is the product of family collaboration—Anisha's father undertook the structural requirements, she and her mother designed the interiors, and her brother created the lighting and the planting for the space—all of which are laid out under a massive frangipani tree her mother used to climb, and from which Anisha remembers looking for six-petal flowers with her father as a child. The iconic pink paint shade that colours the exterior, "September Dawn," has not changed since the house's inception.

# The Cathedral of Christ the Living Saviour



**Address:** [368 / 3A, Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07](#)

**Public Transport:**

The Wijerama / BMICH bus stop (154) is just outside the grounds.

**Parking is available.**

**Architect:** T.N. Wynne-Jones and Wilson Peiris

**Client:** Bishop of Colombo, Rt. Reverend Harold de Soysa

**Year:** 1945–1968

[→ Further reading 1 / 2](#)

Image source:  
Rippleworth

The Cathedral of Christ the Living Saviour—now in what is considered a prime area of Colombo—is located on what was formerly the grounds of the Infectious Disease Hospital. An original home from that time is now that of the archdeacon, and before that, the first archbishop.

A row of cottages behind the cathedral houses retired clergy and their families, while an amphitheatre anchored by a banyan tree also hides in the back of the sprawling grounds. The garden on the grounds hosts a collection of rare flora from around the country and a meditation labyrinth rounds out the property.

The cathedral is unique for its Sri Lankan influences, including vernacular Kandyan architecture and murals of Kandyan and Northern landscapes. These aesthetics are the result of community input and the desire to enter a space that felt independent of colonialism. The church bell is from a ship in Galle.

The cathedral remains unfinished to this day; the country's closed economy at the time of finishing the church aroused suspicion as to how the project received funding. Intended to contain designs from local artists including George Keyt and Barbara Sansoni, the cathedral would have likely been one of the most unique South Asian churches of its time.

## Ishq Colombo



**Address:** [17/2, Alfred Place, Colombo 03](#)

**Public Transport:** The Alfred Place bus stop (multiple buses) is around the corner on Duplication Road.

**Parking is not available.**

**Architect:** Channa Daswatte

**Client:** Hanif Yusoof

**Year:** Built 2003–2004; renovated 2015–2018

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:  
Ishq Colombo

Ishq Colombo is a family home turned boutique villa that lies just beyond a greenery-covered gate off Colombo's busy Duplication Road. A central courtyard anchors the home and shapes the experience of navigating it, bearing a similarity to architecture in the Middle East and North Africa. Ishq's design in particular is modelled after a townhouse in Damascus, Syria, spotted by architect Channa Daswatte on his visit with fellow architect C. Anjalendran to collect Geoffrey Bawa's Aga Khan award.

Originally built for and occupied by the Yusoof family, the property underwent a renovation for hospitality purposes about ten years later. Three bedrooms—two of which are master suites—along with a ground-floor living area, dining room, library, and upstairs living room comprise the home. Personal touches from the family are everywhere. A collection of vintage photographs from Colombo purchased by Mr. Yusoof in an auction adorn a wall on the second floor, while Mrs. Yusoof oversaw much of the gardening—aligning with Daswatte's belief that “buildings are really not to be seen, but to be lived in.” Considering the history of the house, the collaborations and contributions from the family define the property just as much as its name: Ishq is the Arabic word for love.

## MJF Centre West



**Address:** [No. 340, Galle Main Road, Katubedda, Moratuwa 10400](#)

**Public Transport:**

The Katubedda bus stop (multiple buses) is just in front of the turn-in to the centre.

**Parking is available.**

**Architect:** Unknown

**Client:** Unknown

**Year:** Est. 2010

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:

MJF Centre

MJF Centre West is the flagship location of thirteen Merrill J. Fernando Charitable Foundation centres throughout Sri Lanka. Established over a decade ago on the grounds of a former clothing factory, what was once an abandoned lot is now a flourishing community-oriented space.

MJF Centre West primarily caters to underserved women and youths from prekindergarten through young adulthood in the community through a diversity of weekday programming, including parenting and money management workshops, sewing, carpentry, bag-making, mathematics instruction, physical therapy, hospitality education, and more. All initiatives focus on promoting autonomy, from cultivating financial independence in women to developing long-term careers for people with disabilities.

In addition to specially-designed classrooms (including a sensory room), the nine-acre property hosts a one-acre organic farm, a butterfly garden, an arboretum, an information technology laboratory, a hostel, a community library, a café, a sensory garden, a culinary school, a maths centre, a medicinal garden, a carpentry workshop, and a physiotherapy unit. The arboretum—with 300 tree and plant species—is the first of its kind in urban areas of Sri Lanka, and the variety of flora in the butterfly garden has attracted more than 60 species. The space also hosts events, such as performances, a night market for small vendors to sell their crafts and food products, butterfly workshops, and book readings.

## Borella Cemetery



**Address:** [475, Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 08](#)

**Public Transport:**

The House of Fashion Bus Stop (multiple buses) is a five-minute walk.

**Architect:** Unknown

**Year:** 1866

[→ Further reading](#)

Image source:

© John Falconer, 2008,  
Flickr Creative Commons license

As Colombo's main burial ground, the sprawling Borella Cemetery hosts four crematoriums in addition to separate sections for a number of faiths including Hindus, Buddhists, Shintos, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and non-denominational Christians. As a result of its diversity, the cemetery forms its own distinct topography through a mix of greenery and elaborate burial sites. The cemetery is a final resting place both for Colombo locals and public figures. Borella Cemetery also hosts over 300 war burials as part of its 120,000+ graves.

The cemetery is colloquially referred to as Borella Cemetery for its location in the Colombo neighbourhood of the same name. The Colombo Municipal Council presently owns and maintains the cemetery, which is a popular destination for locals and visitors on account of its role in the fabric of Colombo and supernatural notoriety.

