



BRILL



## *In Memoriam: Ronald Lewcock (1929–2022)*

*C. Anjalendran*



Professor Ronald Lewcock at Shibam near Kawkaban (Yemen), in 2007. (Photo: Dominic Sansoni)

Ronald Lewcock, who died in Sri Lanka on August 13, 2022, aged ninety-two, was an authority in his chosen fields—notably the architecture of Sri Lanka, Africa, and the Islamic world—and holder of many professorships. Between 1984 and 1991 Ronald served as professor of architecture and the first Aga Khan Professor of Design for Islamic Societies at MIT, introducing students to the traditions of Islamic architecture and contemporary Islamic architectural design. As an architect and architectural historian, he transformed the lives of countless people he met on his extensive travels and empowered younger generations of architects in their understanding and appreciation of architecture and art.

Ronald was born in Brisbane on September 27, 1929, and started his architectural degree at the University

of Queensland in 1947, completing it in 1951 at the University of Cape Town. He obtained his doctorate from Cape Town in 1961, with a thesis titled “The Architecture of the Cape Colony from 1795 to 1837.”

In 1968–69, he took a sabbatical to pursue fieldwork on this subject. This brought him to Sri Lanka, where he met Barbara Sansoni, whose drawings “Collecting Old Buildings” he had seen in the *Architectural Review* of February 1966. Ronald returned to Sri Lanka for three months every year during the 1970s and early '80s for his research, broadening it to include the local vernacular. He was assisted in his work by Barbara and by Laki Senanayake, who became his close friends. He traveled extensively through Sri Lanka and became enchanted by the island’s varied architecture, finding an affinity with the Arab and colonial architecture of the East African Coast and South Africa. He wrote most of the accompanying texts and designed the layouts for Barbara’s architectural drawings, published as *Vihares & Verandas, Ceylon* in 1978. This coffee-table book was intended to make Sri Lankans aware of their disappearing architectural heritage. Ronald and Barbara married in 1980.

In 1972, Ronald was appointed architect of the America Research Center in Egypt’s conservation project to preserve Bayt al-Razzaz, the largest Mamluk palace of the fifteenth century. Subsequently, at the World Bank’s request, Ronald prepared a proposal for the conservation of the northern half of the old walled city of Cairo.

Ronald also took part in the joint Cambridge/Swiss and Australian expedition to Yemen in 1972. While there, though arrested seven times, he single-handedly measured forty major buildings and exposed over forty rolls of film. Knowledge of the architecture of the capital, Sanaa, led to his appointment as guest curator for the 1976 World of Islam Festival exhibition titled “Nomad and City,” on display at what was then the Museum of Mankind, a part of the British Museum. This immersive exhibition recreated the bazaars within the city of Sanaa, with their sounds, smells, and many-storied

rooms; it also brought alive the tents and lifestyles of the nomads in the desert. Due to its popularity, the exhibition's original schedule was extended from three months to two years. Ronald later advised on the conservation of the Great Mosque of Sanaa, one of the oldest mosques in the Islamic world, originally built during the lifetime of the Prophet.

In 1978 Ronald contributed a chapter on "Architects, Craftsmen and Builders: Materials and Techniques," as well as two chapters describing key monuments in Arabia (with Geoffrey King) and in East Africa, to George Mitchell's all-embracing work *Architecture of the Islamic World*, which has gone through many editions.

Following the publication of *Traditional Architecture in Kuwait and the Northern Gulf* in 1978, Ronald was appointed as heritage conservation advisor to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman. He also served as a UNESCO conservation consultant for many sites in the Gulf and Arabia and, from 1982 to 1990, as technical coordinator for two UNESCO campaigns: one in Sanaa and the other in the city of Shibam, located in the Wadi Hadramawt in Yemen. Between 1991 and 1997, Ronald was the coordinator of the UN-UNESCO joint project for the conservation and urban rehabilitation of Uzbekistan.

Ronald prepared *The Architecture of an Island: The Living Legacy of Sri Lanka* for publication in 1998. This magnum opus was co-authored with Barbara, who did most of the perspectives, and Laki Senanayake, who did the remainder, extending the archive of measured drawings begun by Ulrik Plesner in the early 1960s. The project showed the domestic and religious architecture of the various ethnic groups in Sri Lanka—the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims—and of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, who had each colonized the island in turn,

beginning in the early 1500s. Unfortunately, more than half of the one hundred examples of vernacular buildings it contains have since disappeared.

Beginning in 1991, Ronald taught as a professor in the School of Architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, joined by many of his students from the Aga Khan Program at MIT. He was appointed Professor Emeritus in 2008. Named an honorary professor at the University of Queensland in 2007, Ronald would lecture there until 2016, teaching a senior course on "Architecture in Asia."

Ronald and Barbara always returned to Cambridge, UK, during the summer months before setting off around the world. Ronald had been awarded a research fellowship to Clare Hall in 1970, and taught at Cambridge and at the Architectural Association in London. Barbara either accompanied him or returned to her beloved Sri Lanka, where she ran a handloom textile company, Barefoot. Her cosmopolitan experience was instrumental in facilitating exports all over the world of handwoven Sri Lankan fabrics and the unique items made from them, such as bags, table linen, clothes, and toys. Her use of color was always dazzling and inspiring, and her company provided employment for hundreds of women in Sri Lanka, as weavers, seamstresses, and embroiderers. Her work was recognized with several awards, including an honorary doctorate from the University of the Visual and Performing Arts of Sri Lanka. Ronald was devoted to Barbara, who predeceased him in April 2022. He is survived by two stepsons, Simon Sansoni of London and Dominic Sansoni of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

*Colombo, Sri Lanka*