

Against All Odds

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Thusitha Wijayasena, Chairman, Kandy City Centre (KCC) has created a landmark in the hill capital that benefits the country and the public. He persevered through great challenges to complete the project that he felt passionate about and he believed he needed to finish against all odds. The KCC was built solely utilising his personal wealth without any foreign investment or partnership. His story offers many lessons for future entrepreneurs. By providing Nurwarata Nuwarak, Thusitha Wijayasena has done a great public service.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Kandy City Centre is your iconic project. Are there any new developments planned?

Originally the master plan that was developed for KCC in 1995 consisted of ten projects. The relevant Government authorities approved the project, but we were able to implement only the KCC and the car park. Today apart from the KCC shopping complex and car park, we are in the process of constructing a 'New Wing', which consist of a multiplex cinema, an auditorium and a banquet hall. KCC will be amalgamated with these new sections, which will be ready by the end of this year. The multiplex cinema complex with three theatres and a banquet hall will be of international standards. I am sure this will add another dimension to our KCC project.

KCC celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. I will not start on anything else in Kandy until I finish the entire project that KCC was meant to be. We had a vision and we had the funds as well. If the relevant authorities had supported us we would have finished the ten projects in 2002. I would have been able to save all my properties and assets. However, I am happy that I was able to complete this project on my own and open it to the public in December 2008. The project took 25 years to complete and the public enjoy and benefit from it. My family and I have suffered a great deal, but we are proud that we have been able to give something of value to

the public.

It was my plan, my property and 90 per cent of the funds were mine. We created direct and indirect jobs through our project. We helped people, developed them and their quality of life, and developed systems. The public is enjoying all of what we did on our own. We created 35,000 direct and indirect jobs over the course of the project. We need these kinds of project in Sri Lanka to help the low-income population of the country. If you take businesses in Colombo, only a few people enjoy the benefits. Money circulates among a few.

We implement a vision because of our passion. It is a landmark in Kandy and even after 50 years, the standard will be the same. We have been managing and operating KCC smoothly for ten years and have received no complaints nor problems. There is a footfall of over 100,000 to the KCC every day, which increases during weekends. There are 12 banks, a fashion zone and food outlets and entertainment.

KCC was funded and spearheaded by you. Can you tell us your experience?

I started my career in the vehicle import business. I used to travel frequently to Japan and Hong Kong where I visited many malls. In 1992-1993 the World Trade Centre project commenced, which was a Chinese project with Hong Kong shareholders. At that time, I had a plan for a project in Colombo, but I wanted to do something with a Sri Lankan identity. My first project was in Kotahena, 11 towers with 2,000 apartments, opposite the Colombo Harbour's Jaya Container Terminal and adjoining the Ceylon Tobacco Company. It was a six-acre property. Unfortunately, the Government acquired the land for the port expansion project. I agreed at that time. I lost the land and money. Meanwhile, we had then begun work on the Kandy City Centre.

The Kandy City Centre was as a result of a request made by the Mahanayake of the Asgiriya Chapter, who wanted me to do something for the development of Kandy as no one was investing in the city. He urged me to upgrade Kandy and its people. Kandy City Centre was first proposed as Phase I of the Kandy Master Plan in 1995 to uplift and enhance the quality of lives, create jobs, boost the economy by becoming the commercial hub of the Central Province of Sri Lanka as well as a popular tourist

destination.

I was young then and I bought the land. It was quite an expensive property even at that time. I started the project at the end of 1998. I acquired the services of excellent consultants at that time, Ashley de Vos from Sri Lanka and Chandra Abeysinghe from Singapore, who was one of the key master planners of Singapore's urbanisation. We jointly designed the project, which was modern yet, also safeguarded the culture of the country. We are Sri Lankans. Therefore, I wanted to preserve our culture. We started in 1994, this project was of high standard and blended the culture and modernisation of Kandy.

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At that time a new Government came into power. They stopped the project. We had just started the construction of the underground basement. We suffered for three years to obtain the required clearance and approvals. They said Kandy needed a master plan. I encountered many problems. Due to a lack of knowledge, some residents in Kandy too were against the project, stating that I am from Colombo and that they were worried about their businesses. The entire business community and political parties were on one side. I was challenged. But I like to challenge and to fight. I did not abandon this because I was ready for the challenge. After 1994, I suffered for many years to get the necessary clearance. In 1998 we received special approval from the Government to start groundwork – piling and earth moving. The property on which the KCC is located is actually the original Bogambara Lake, which was filled by the British, it is something people do not know. The Kandy Lake we see today is known as the Kiri Muhuda. The piling cost was three times more than what was estimated. That was one of our major issues. From 1998-2000 we finished piling work. We started construction of the KCC in 2002. By the time we started, the dollar rate had increased rapidly. We planned to finish by 2005, however during the construction phase we were stopped 21 times. The Government authorities stopped the project at various instances for haphazard and baseless reasons. This was because there was no proper authority or an umbrella organisation to bring these organisations together and present one set of regulations for a project of this magnitude. When a project such as this is stopped even for a month or two, the costs skyrocket.

At that time, we borrowed 800 million rupees from one bank. Actually it was not necessary for us to borrow, we did so based on a request. Instead of borrowing we could have sold a few properties and raised that 800 million rupees. Between 2002 and 2005, we paid 650 million rupees as interest without revenue. The loan was not granted as development finance because there were no development banks. If it had been taken from a development bank there would have at least been interest capitalisation. Finally, I began losing my properties, I had to sell my assets to fund the project. Sri Lanka is suffering because there is no development finance institute. All financing institutes provide a majority of their financing on consumer loans. My analysis is that credit cards, pawning and leasing activities do not bring about economic development. That is a major problem in this country, because finance institutes want quick profits and quick money. In the long run it is not good for the people or the country since there is no proper development objectives. Our banking sector did not support development and we suffered heavily. No one asked me whether I needed support, though this was a project with public benefit. Once the groundwork was complete, the land had reduced value and there was no turning back for me. We had to finish the project. If we stopped half way, then the project too would not have had a value. When the structure was finished, there was no central sewerage system in Kandy. JAICA and BOI had agreed to introduce the sewerage system in Kandy. Despite being the second biggest city in Sri Lanka, even today Kandy does not have a central sewerage system. Finally, we spent 300 million rupees from our own money to introduce a sewerage system. The BOI financed part of the machine cost. We struggled for two years to obtain approval, because no one in Sri Lanka had the required experience in this field.

We opened the Kandy City Centre in December 2008. By 2009, the public was visiting the KCC in large numbers. There are 14 escalators at KCC, whereas there were only 19 escalators in total in Colombo at the time. This was the only 100 per cent privately owned project in Sri Lanka and it is the only shopping mall in Kandy. We selected the stores for the KCC very carefully. This was also a two-year trial period for us as we too were not accustomed to the style of management.

KCC is the most modern and innovative complex in Sri Lanka. It is designed with ultra-modern features yet preserving the iconic Kandyan architecture. What are the results today? Who enjoys? The public. We have upgraded the quality of life of the people and I am very happy about that.

We Did Our Duty To The Country And The People. We Operate Under One Umbrella; We Respect All Religions And Celebrate All Important Festivals At The KCC. We Have One Rule And One Policy.

Today, everyone understands my project and they visit. From the shop owners to the banks, everyone supports me now. They understand what KCC has done for the city. We did something for our country through our sheer hard work, but there are others who become billionaires overnight. Only 'Business Today' gave me recognition. The 'Business Today' team has always been with me. I must mention the BOI and Dr Sarath Amunugama, when he was Minister in charge of the BOI, he supported me. With respect to this unique entrepreneurial marvel, the BOI has granted the project 'Flagship' status. At that time there were only 14 BOI 'Flagship' projects of which two belonged to me, the rest were foreign investments. We did our duty to the country and the people. We operate under one umbrella; we respect all religions and celebrate all important festivals at the KCC. We have one rule and one policy. Our country also needs one policy and one law. This is the only solution for Sri Lanka.

What is your advice to young entrepreneurs from your experience?

It is very important to understand the type of businesses that Sri Lanka requires. It is sad that no one is starting new projects today. They simply follow what others are doing. The best example is the KCC, where today everyone is trying to follow the KCC concept. My advice is to study well as to what the country needs and do something different. What is important is to go beyond the conventional rather than following the past. Even a small clothing store or restaurant sometimes turns out to be very successful. You will be successful if you do something based on new ideas. Do it differently. Take Dharshan Munidasa of Ministry of Crab, he is doing things differently. We too are doing something different. No other food court in Sri Lanka can compare to the food court at KCC. My son plans everything. We have been successful without marketing. We have maintained the standard, the price and quality. Your magazine too is over 30 years and you have maintained the same standard throughout as well as maintained a good relationship with your clientele. We always look at people with a vision. I believe that implementing a good vision is what is important.

My main advice is to not give up on your vision and dreams in the face of challenges, if you are passionate about your project, and if you believe in yourself. Perseverance is key if you want to achieve your goals. It's not going to be easy, and you will likely make mistakes. But, learn from your mistakes and keep going.

What made you get enter the field of movie production and what was your experience from Aloko Udapadi?

I am a different person. My thinking was to find a way to give an insight into our history in a short and quick manner. We have a great history. I spent 200 million rupees on this movie for our people to understand our history. The movie was successful. However, we were unable to recover the expenditure. 2.2 million Sri Lankans watched this movie and we have released it internationally as well. I always thought about ways to help the public by providing them with knowledge and I have always thought about the country.

Every Challenge That Came My Way Became An Inspiration, A Drive To Make “The Impossible Possible”. If You Have A Passion For What You Do, If You Have A Passion For Life, There Are Many Places And People In Whom You Can Find Inspiration.

I was planning to do ten movies. Unfortunately, I had to stop with one project. As a very fast growing industry I would have been able to generate 100,000 jobs for the cinema industry, unfortunately no one supported me. I stopped financing movies as there was no point. Only a few people are enjoying the maximum benefit even in the film industry. The practice is to grow while crushing others. Some seniors in the industry did not like my project, they were against me and tried to block me from all sides. Only a few supported me, but the majority in the industry were against me. They did not like high quality movies being made in Sri Lanka. They were attacking me at discussions and conferences. Likewise, Aloko Udapadi was done well for the public. I would have been able to participate in the transformation of the industry. Even though we had Censor Board approval for all viewing, unfortunately, the Ministry of Education also stopped my movie from being shown to young students, stipulating that it can only be watched by students from year nine and upwards. I will not be making anymore movies. We of course had already started building a cinema complex at the KCC. We can create many more new direct and indirect job opportunities through this sector. I took some risk and managed to introduce a set

of new talented people into this industry. We created more than 2,000 jobs during the making of Aloko Udapadi. The seniors in the industry are not doing anything to uplift the industry. The future of the cinema industry is questionable.

What inspires you?

The inherent willingness and ability to contribute to a better community through entrepreneurship is what inspires and motivates me. As entrepreneurs, we have an ability to uplift many lives and communities. It is a shame if we waste that ability. I spend a good part of my day on projects that I do in order to give back to society. When I see those materialise, it is a great sense of fulfillment, which in turn inspires me to do something similar again. I want to leave behind a legacy, and I draw comfort in the fact that I have done my duty to my country and community.

I draw inspiration from my faith in Buddhism, my wife, my son and daughter too keep me going. Over 35 years ago, when I got married, I wanted to provide my wife with a good life. After my son and daughter were born, I was further inspired to provide them with the best possible life I could give them; one I never had as both my parents passed away when I was a child. Decades later, they are still the main reason why I get out of bed every morning. But, now my purpose is bigger and better because I have many lives that depend on me. I receive so much joy by going to work, talking to my employees, hearing how their lives have been positively impacted where some have even transformed their lives after joining my organisation. I take a genuine interest in everyone who works for me. As my business grew, every challenge that came my way became an inspiration, a drive to make “the impossible possible”. If you have a passion for what you do, if you have a passion for life, there are many places and people in whom you can find inspiration.

It was the members of my family – my wife, son and daughter who supported me. My staff of 400 is appreciative of what I have done and they are always with me. I appreciate my team. The building is not my asset; it is the people who are my assets. I believe it is not the customer who is king, but the staff. If staff members are treated like kings, they will in turn treat customers well. I take this opportunity to thank the KCC tenants, genuine finance institutions, contractors and business partners for their understanding and support during this journey.

Despite the fact that I have lost all my personal wealth to build and maintain a 'City within a City of Kandy' (Nuwarata Nuwarak), my family and I are humble and happy to see the people of Kandy embrace this project as part of their life. I feel I have done my duty to my country and to Sri Lankans.

