

Design Forum: Pushing Boundaries

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Founded by two architects who strive to innovate and inculcate novelty into living spaces, Design Forum have been pushing their boundaries while breaking free from what is contemporary and conventional for over a decade. Journeying on for 15 years, Rajiv Senanayake and Lilantha Wijayapala talk about how they differ from the rest and what fuelled their success.

By Hansani Bandara | Photographs Indika De Silva

Becoming an architect was not the childhood dream of either Rajiv Senanayake or Lilantha

Wijayapala. For them, it was an opportunity that arose by chance, which they seized with open arms and have now found to be their passion. “I wanted to sail, but like you miss the bus on a trip, I missed my ship,” says Senanayake. “Then the City School of Architects opened and I was fortunate enough to join them. It took eight years to complete my studies following which I started practicing at Surath Wickramasinghe Associates (SWA) as a Junior Architect. That is where the two of us originally met.”

Joining the conversation, Wijayapala said, “my situation was also somewhat similar in the sense that I also wanted to sail. Then, after A/Ls I got to know about architecture through a friend of mine and started digging up on the subject. I learned the basics of architecture at SWA before going on to study at the University of Moratuwa, where I studied for six years.” Then the duo again met at Westgate, an interior design company, where they were exposed to the manufacturing process of designs. Having gained experience and confidence as two partners who dared to be different, they founded Design Forum in 2000. They have contrasting personalities-while Senanayake is the boisterous one who enjoys being out on the field, Wijayapala is reserved and prefers to work out the intricacies of architecture. Yet, surprisingly they possess the uncanny ability of thinking alike when it comes to working as a team. They share the same core values, and this has contributed immensely to their success.

The ethos of Design Forum is to create living spaces that are direct translations of the lifestyles of the inhabitants; and it is this attitude that drives them to understand what designs would best benefit their clients.

“We try to design for the client, we try to make it a living space-if it is a house-that the client can live in. We don’t design for ourselves and expect them to live in that house. We get to know our clients very well and that’s where the houses we design become very personalised,” explained Senanayake.

It is the personalised services that are provided by the company that make them stand out from the rest. Both Senanayake and Wijayapala firmly believe in utilising the best resources for every project that they work on, irrespective of its magnitude. Moreover, their active presence during each step of the decision making process, when it comes to a project-be it residential or corporate-has earned them a repute of reliability. “Of the resources we have, architects at Design Forum are better by design, so we go there in person. It is not just a business for us; where we build a house or a company and then move to the next project.

But the downside of that is clients expect you to be there at every meeting. Even though we have other architects who work with us and they visit the sites with us, the clients expect us to make the decision. It has come to that. We try to keep it personalised, we have done it successfully for the past 15 years and enjoy doing it. That is what differentiates us from the others,” says Wijayapala.

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The duo agrees that as much as managing clients and working within strict budgets can be challenging, it is these two aspects that make their practices as architects all the more interesting, while contributing immensely towards a better end product. For Design Forum, each project is a challenge that drives them to create something unique. Whether it is a residential or a corporate project, the clients always have numerous requirements that should collectively fit into a single budget. Yet for them, the tougher the challenge is, the better the final product will be.

Ultimately, they attribute their success to the single factor of having repeat clients. They believe that it stands testimony to the fact that they have done what is right. Design Forum take pride in stating that many of their corporate clients have been long standing.

Sharing their thoughts on contemporary Sri Lankan architecture, Senanayake and Wijayapala opined that it keeps evolving with the adaptation of novel technology, since unlike in the past, people today have realised the significance of seeking architectural services when it comes to construction. And the new generation who enter the field are much bolder. They have access to knowledge and are not afraid to try new things. However, in terms of the development of the profession, Senanayake says it is vital that a governing body establishes a hold on the profession to drive its development. “Sri Lankan architects should be given more prominence and recognition. There are many foreign architects who come and practice in Sri Lanka, which is a good thing. But they should come in as concept architects for projects and a percentage of 60-70 from the work should be given to local architects. That’s how the profession can develop and the local architects can gain exposure.”

As this dynamic duo along with Design Forum venture to explore new strides in architecture, they are positive about the future and their dream is for the company to grow along with the staff, as “the sky is the limit” for its potential.