

DesignForum: A Different Perspective

Posted on

Architects Rajiv Senanayake, Director and Lilantha Wijayapala, Director of DesignForum have always taken a different approach focusing on the client's requirements as opposed to making statements. Always working as a team while giving prominence to individuality, the duo have been able to create live-able spaces that are practical ranging from residential, hospitality to corporates, where the designs continue to be relevant. Celebrating 20 years, architects Rajiv Senanayake and Lilantha Wijayapala discuss the journey of the company as well as points to ponder on the architectural field and industry in general.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe.**Assisted by** Swetha Ratnajothi.

Photography Menaka Aravinda.

designforum is celebrating 20 years. What has the journey of the company been so far?

Lilantha Wijayapala (LW): We started in 2000. We never thought the business would survive for this long because it was created by two vastly different individuals. But, we managed and continued to grow to be where we are today.

Rajiv Senanayake (RS): Two architects working together, generally is not an easy task. We are both from very different architectural backgrounds and for us to come together and form a business was not easy. Taking it on as a challenge, we proceeded with launching DesignForum in 2000.

Lilantha studied at the University of Moratuwa, Katubedda and I obtained my degree from City School of Architecture, which is a private school.

The secret of our success is that we keep our work individualized. Being from different backgrounds and having developed different architectural styles, working

on our individual projects seemed apt rather than meeting at loggerheads over the same project. Although we work separate from one another we go forward as one company. That was the core attribute of our business relationship, we personally do not compete with each other.

LW: The past 20 years have been filled with learning experiences and challenges not only in the field of architecture but even in the running of a business. With work slowing several times in the past years, especially after the Easter attacks of 2019 and the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020. However, time after time we have been able to overcome these hurdles and move forward.

RS: A key reason as to why we have been able to move on from one challenge to another, is the balance we maintain when running the business. Lilantha is more cautious and calculated whereas I have a more “act now” approach, any decision is made taking into account both points of view. It is this balance that is crucial for the growth of our business.

How do you work with clients?

LW: Our common goal is to keep our client’s needs first. This approach has been useful in securing long-standing relationships with our corporate clientele. We have been continually working with corporates such as Vision Care, SLT, Mobitel, DFCC, Hemas, and CitiBank. A key element of our design is that we do not have a specific design language, therefore none of our projects look alike. If one were to walk into one of our buildings it would be difficult to determine who the architect was, but you will see more influence of the user or client in the design.



Architect Rajiv Senanayake, Director of DesignForum



Lilantha Wijayapala, Director of DesignForum

RS: Yes, we design primarily for our clients and their needs. At times they may make requests that we do not whole-heartedly agree but we always find a compromise so that the client is not compelled to seek the advice of a non-architect. In a way we are protecting the profession as well. We see many non-architects doing projects. If we are stringent in our approach the client will seek alternatives, which are not conducive to a good client-architect relationship, nor the profession. It is a challenge nationally, and we have to protect our profession. If not, the profession will suffer and, in the future an architect will be a non-existent entity.

We have voiced our concerns to the Institute of Architects, however, we prefer to do things our own way and we try to make that difference at least at our level. With time, people are getting to know that we work differently and there is appreciation and respect. We try not to overly publicize the work we have done, although, having completed many projects overseas such as; Kenya, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Maldives and having worked with long-standing corporate clients, namely; Vision Care for about 19 years, DFCC 15 years, and Mobitel and SLT for eight years. They are return customers and that is how we measure our success. It proves that you have done something right.



LW: When we say we do what the client wants, it is not merely about aesthetics. It is about the services, the day to day functioning of the building and living within. Sometimes people only look at just one aspect. We have grown with the corporates that we work with. With the experience that we have, we can now confidently step into even unknown “waters” because we know what to expect and how to deal with challenges. That is one of the key attributes of our business. It is not just 20 years of beautiful architecture but it is beautiful and practical, architectural spaces.

RS: It is about live-able spaces or working spaces. Generally, the original architecture of a commercial or residential property is changed over time. But we are proud to say that all the residential and commercial properties that we have done still perform under the same function. They have not been converted into any other type of building, which is a huge reflection of our work.

there is a perception that it is difficult to work with architects. What do you think?

RS: Yes, that perception is prevalent amongst many people and that is why architects in Sri Lanka do not get enough work. There are those who believe architects are arrogant and make you live in designed spaces that they want. DesignForum strives to challenge this misconception.

LW: In the past, architects were people who made statement buildings but now it has changed. You have to deliver on what the client wants. You need to mold the design in the right way. It is a balance between what the client wants and what they need.

RS: A good architect explains to the client, on how the design should be done in the right way. We need to understand the difference between want and need, and provide the required balance. We need to enjoy what we are doing and it shows in our work as well. We cannot be limited to a box saying we only do a particular type of work. If someone comes and tells us to convert a bus into a mobile shop, we will do it because we appreciate a project with challenge, which allows us to step out of the norm of everyday projects.

LW: The architectural sector is very much different now because the clients are exposed to many designs online and on social media. Therefore, they will have varied requests that change with each project.

RS: Many say that with the developments in technology, the architect may become redundant as with virtual reality and artificial intelligence a person could simply have their house designed online. But the expertise of an architect is required to understand the various elements that make a house a home. As architects we have to know the latest trends and new technologies, if not we will be left behind.

Your thoughts about the architectural sector and the industry in sri Lanka?

LW: I would say that in general, every profession is in a diminishing line, mostly because of ethics. Most are focused on making money and are hesitant to share the work with others. That is where the Government comes in. We have to recognize our scope and ethics, our responsibilities and perform well. The Government should identify at least the few professionals among the rest so that they lead the way for others to follow. We all need to do our part.

RS: The Government needs to identify there is a qualified architectural profession in Sri Lanka. During the 30-year conflict the Sri Lankan architects were not able to do many large projects. But we have learnt and worked with foreign architects and companies overseas. We have the exposure and the capabilities to do large projects. Furthermore, it is also the responsibility of the architects to do a project properly and deliver something good. An architect should be selected on the quality

of his work and not the amount he charges as a fee.

LW: We need to maintain a standard. In other countries all architects charge a flat fee and they are selected for the service they offer. And all are respected equally. Sri Lanka used to have a standard rate, which was removed for unknown reasons. We see people in the same profession challenging each other by undercutting. If you lose your ethics, a firm will not be able to survive since the profession as a whole will not survive. Let the client choose you based on your technical skills and the work that you have done on how you manage and deliver the project. Those are the things that need to be brought in by the Government. We have to ensure growth in the architectural profession and it should be respectable. Professionals should not criticize each other behind their backs but it should be a more open discussion. That would be a more ethical and productive way of doing things.

RS: Survival is the real challenge in our profession. Sri Lankan architects are not given the due recognition. I am not talking about the clients, but it is the Government. For instance, an architect studies for almost eight years but once he/she draws a plan it is checked by a technical officer at the Local Council who has studied for only one year in a drafting course. He looks at the plan and says that everything is wrong. With what background can he say that? We say that position should be held by an engineer or architect.



LW: The architecture schools are producing 75 to 100 qualified architects per year it is something the Government has to look into.

RS: When we are selected as architects for overseas projects we are mentioned only as design consultants though we do the designs. Sixty to eighty percent of the work is done by the local partner who does the drawings and obtains the necessary approvals. That's how the society, the architects and the country grows. In Sri Lanka this does not happen. The foreign architect is given all the prominence and the local architect is required only as a signatory. Whenever DesignForum is involved in such projects in Sri Lanka we ensure that we do at least some form of design work, and we participate in all the discussions and meetings. That is how Sri Lankan architects can develop as well. Generally, what happens is that the BOI brings the investment and foreign funded projects will bring their own architects, contractors and labor, then what is left for Sri Lanka? These are important areas that the Government has to look into.

LW: In Singapore the lead consultant is the architect. That is the reason why the built environment is pleasing, methodical and organized. They do not build in an ad hoc manner. Most of the projects in Sri Lanka are managed by a project manager who is not an architect and the focus is on the time of completion and not quality. An architect should be taking the lead. As a country we give prominence to the foreign experts, we need to give that same recognition to Sri Lankan experts as well.

new normal, how has work changed?

LW: The use of online tools has become easier to work from home. The first lockdown brought about a lot of changes to the way in which the office functioned as well as the overall structure.

RS: We were lucky enough to have the technology because construction sites need to have cameras and they need to be connectable on the cameras. We have a video call with the site supervisor who shows us the progress. In terms of infrastructure, we need to go to the next level as a country with better online connectivity.

W: Yes, this would minimize the travel distance and time. You may not have to build a road but provide the necessary infrastructure to connect people digitally.

RS: We are working with a company in New Zealand and the entire project is done

via online communications. In that way, the COVID-19 situation opened our eyes to new avenues and opportunities but it is essential to have adequate digital infrastructure as well.

future?

RS: I would tell architects to market themselves as people who have value. To have a status and be respected. The Government needs to recognize us as active partners in infrastructure development. Everyone speaks about urban planning and beautifying Colombo but how many architects do you see at these forums with the President or the Prime Minister? There should be at least 15 architects giving their views.

LW: During our eight years of study we had six months of Medical College training and that was to understand the mind-set of people. We learn about engineering, so that what we design is practical. Engineering does not mean just the structure but services, air conditioning, electricity and water lines. We learnt Sociology to understand about living in communities and spaces. We have tried to combine all these factors when designing, for the past 20 years. I would say that architects have better experience to voice their opinion or provide suggestions in such forums. That recognition has to be given by the Government

RS: As in all professions, co-existence needs to be there. An architect has to work with an engineer, interior designers and landscape experts as a team. We can make a difference if we work as a team, and technically there is a huge difference. That has to be understood by everyone, by the clients, and the Government.

LW: We were not thinking about the future four years ago. But now of course we have because we have one from the next generation on board to take over the company in the future

RS: We are happy to see that the younger generation is more open to working with architects. Things are changing and it is encouraging. Architects need to be cautious and do the best work because what we construct is visible for years.

As architects we get better with time; we are like fine wine. We will be around, guiding the younger generation of what work should be done, and what should not be done. Gradually they will take over the operations. Hopefully, they will carry over the same clients. In this digital world, the younger generation does not have the

patience that we had and they want to earn money quickly. We all need to look at the bigger picture, and do things the right way.