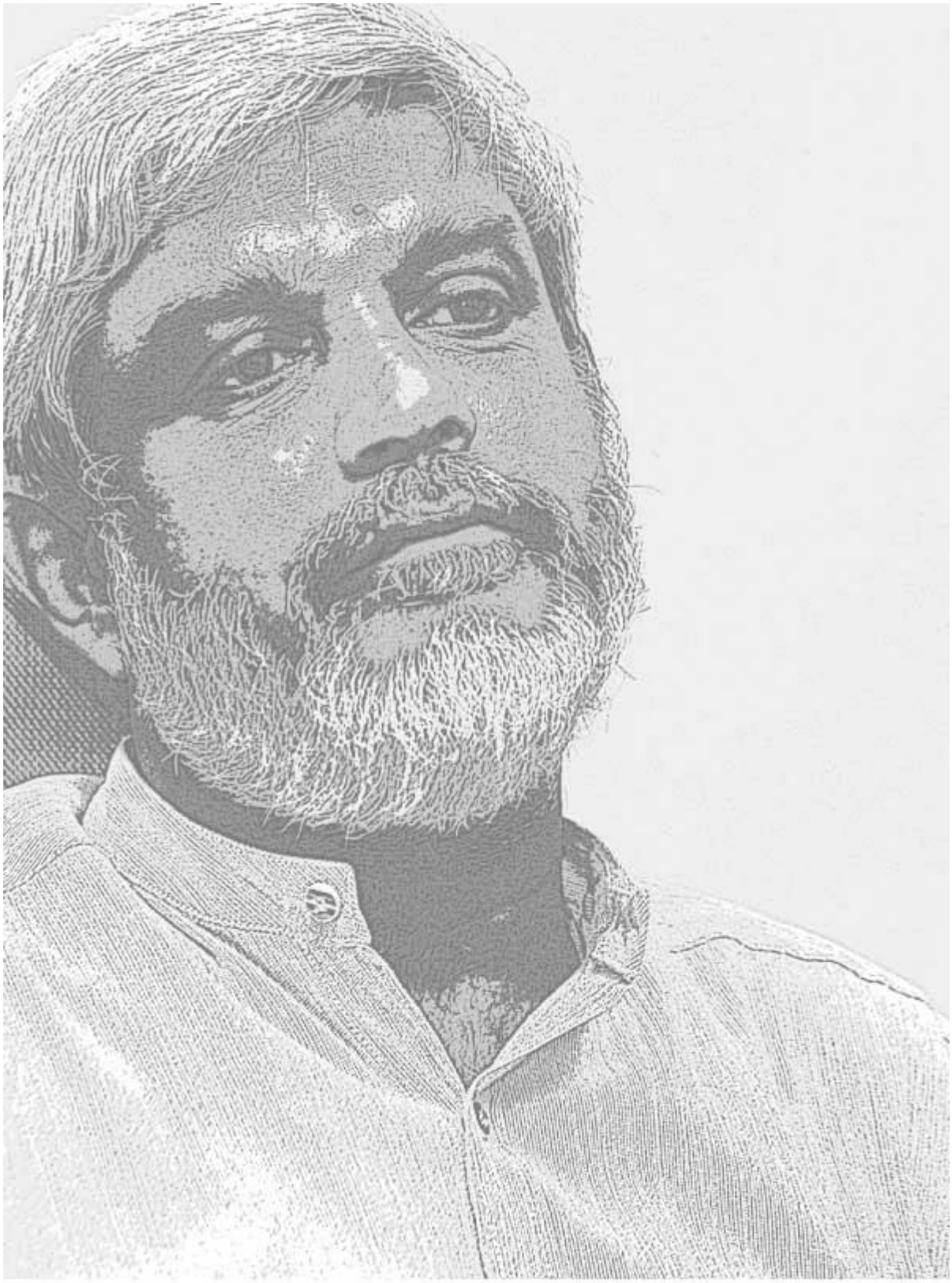
From Generalist To Specialist: The Sri Lankan Architect



The modern day architect stems from the role of the master builder and 2007, marks half a century of the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects. To mark this celebration a number of events are planned including hosting of the Arcasia Council meeting and Arcasia Forum 14 in Colombo later this month.

President of the SLIA, Jayantha Perera tells Business Today of the Institute's journey and the challenge of sustainable architecture; the future of the profession.
Arcasia is a regional architectural body that consists of members all from rice eating countries with Australia and New Zealand knocking on the door…

By Harin Fernando

On the long-standing link between SLIA and Arcasia?
The SLIA is a founder member of Arcasia. Arcasia comprises of 17 architectural institutes, from 17 Asian nations. The current membership spread, covers almost all of Asia except for a few countries such as the Maldives and Afghanistan.

Every year a council meeting is held where the official aspects of Arcasia administrative business is taken care of. The presidents of the 17 member institutes and office bearers, form the Council.

Under the Arcasia movement there are three regions. The SAARC member states roughly gather together and become region 'A.' Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia etc. form region 'B,' with Japan and China etc. forming the final 'C' region.

The Arcasia office bearers consist of a Chairman, three deputy Chairmen from each region, a secretary and a treasurer. Previously two Sri Lankans have had held the position of Chairman, the first was Archt. Lala Aditya, the very second Chairman of Arcasia, and Archt. Surath Wickramasinghe. Presently the Chairmanship rotates every two years.

There is also the Arcasia Committee on Architectural Education; I had the privilege of holding Chairmanship of this from 2004 – 2006.

“In Sri Lanka We Have 900 Architects As And When Compared To Australia That Has The Same Population As Us, But They Have Many Thousands Of Members.”
Arcasia meets every year and the title ‘forum’ or ‘congress’ is declared on an alternative basis. As such ‘Forum 13′ happened in Thailand in 2005 with ‘Forum 14′ happening this year in Sri Lanka. The last Arcasia Congress took place in China last year and in 2008 the Arcasia Congress will be held in Korea.

This is the third time we are hosting an Arcasia event in Sri Lanka. We have hosted one congress and one forum to date. The theme for this year’s forum is ‘Asia Nation – Architecture Across Cultures.’ Here we are trying to focus on the mingling of architectural traditions and track these similarities across the Asian architectural style.

On forming Arcasia?
Back in the day, a number of current Arcasia member nations were also members of the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA).

What many Asian members found was that the CAA was controlled to a large extent by the member states of Europe, Australia and Africa, who were very powerful.

It was this lack of influence and standing within the CAA, that led to Asian member states one day at a CAA meeting deciding to start their own regional body.

The impetus was so great, that a number of members actually resigned from the CAA. Subsequently however they rejoined, in order to maintain some form of status quo.

Today the cohesion of the members of Arcasia is fantastic and it has evolved in to a very strong body, representing our profession.

On the history of SLIA?

Reviving an idea that dated back to 1932, it was in 1957 that 16 like minded architects (all members of the Royal Institute of British Architects) met at the Galle Face Hotel and established the, as it was known then, Ceylon Institute of Architects (CIA), an affiliated body of the RIBA.

At that time the CIA was the only affiliate to RIBA in the whole of south east Asia. ‘Ceylon’ had been abandoned with the formation of the republic in 1972 and in 1976 the CIA was incorporated by an act of parliament and henceforth referred to as the SLIA.

In 1996, the SLIA was made the body under which architects would register in order to allow to practice Architecture in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Institute of Architects (Amendment) Law No. 14 of 1996 vested power in the Institute to form an ‘Architects Registration Board.’

With the formation of this Board in February 1997 all those who practice the profession of architecture in Sri Lanka are required to register under three categories namely ‘Chartered Architects,’ ‘Architects,’ and ‘Architectural Licentiates.’

This is a unique feature, in the rest of the world the professional body and the registration body are two separate entities, this is not the case here in Sri Lanka.

Pieter Keuneman presented our first act and Nimal Siripala De Silva, the second, both curiously under SLFP rule.

The first 25 years saw us getting our house in to order with regard to our incorporation etc. Following our silver jubilee, we embarked on consolidating our efforts of the first 25 years.

It was Archt. Surath Wickramasinghe, who led an initiative to begin a trade exhibition. The revenue generated from this event even saw us moving into our

home in a very short period of time, as and when compared to other similar professional bodies. This annual event to this day is a great success and has in a way become the cornerstone of our financial income.

Today SLIA membership stands around 700, and with only a limited number of ranks the SLIA continues to do a lot of work. We also have four boards, under the banners of ‘Education, Professional Affairs, Publications and Management.’

Considering the future of the SLIA we hope to take our standing on a regional basis at the same time as ensuring that the ‘Sri Lankan Architect’ evolves into a global commodity that can work anywhere around the world.

Activities to celebrate 50 years of the SLIA?
Perhaps the most significant feature is the Arcasia Forum being held in Colombo, later this month. At a committee meeting a couple of years back they were deliberating who would host the 2007 Forum, and having realised that the SLIA was going to be celebrating 50 years in 2007, I soon volunteered to be the host of the 2007 Forum.

Even though this year both the Philippines and Pakistan are celebrating significant milestones in their local professions, such is the cohesion and sense of unity within Arcasia, that the Forum was agreed to be held in Colombo.

The forum will feature an eminent and reputed line up of speakers including the current American Institute of Architects, Gold Medallist Archt. Antoine Predock.

Other activities planned include the launch of a first day cover and the launch of a coffee table book on the history and the people who drove the first 50 years of the SLIA, including unveiling a portrait of Archt. Herbert E Gonsal, the first General Secretary, who was instrumental in setting up the CIA and of Dr Justin Samarasekara who is considered as the person responsible for the beginnings of establishing formal architectural education in Sri Lanka.

The SLIA also plans to honour the only remaining living architect who was amongst the founding 16 members of the Association, Archt. Norbert Wijesinghe.

On the changing perception of the profession?
It is definitely changing, just look at entry to the University of Moratuwa Architecture course. Those days for 25 places around 65 would sit an entrance examination. Today for 50 places, demand has risen to 4000 applicants.

In Sri Lanka we have 900 architects as and when compared to Australia that has the same population as us, but they have many thousands of members.

It is a universal norm that architects anywhere design less than 10% of constructions, perhaps with the exceptions of Scandinavian countries.

In a Sri Lankan context, of the 700 architects, let us say 200 are out of the country, and 50 are in rural areas, the rest remain in Colombo.

On opportunity of education?
Architecture like medicine, takes a long time to study. The global standard to become an architect is a minimum of five years full time study and two years full time training under a Chartered Architect. So even a genius has to go through a minimum of seven years.

This is a key reason for individuals not willing to consider architecture as a career, given other career options where remuneration is quick and fast. But having said that architecture is different every day and as an architect you will work on a large number of different projects and meet a diverse number of clients. Architecture is a mix of art and science and is a very enjoyable profession.

The SLIA has a Board of Architectural Education (BAE) that has via the act of parliament, total control of the study of architecture in Sri Lanka. Any institute or university has to come through the BAE.

The local university can only provide 50 places and because of this in 1980 the SLIA decided to run a course in architecture, for those who are talented but did not make the cut off marks to enter university. The school operates under the SLIA's blessing and is known as the Colombo School of Architecture (CSA). Presently we intake 30 students annually on a part time basis and some of them are doing really well, such as Archt. Murad Ismail, Archt.Nela de Zoysa, Archt. Deepika Dharmadasa and many more former CSA students. The course is structured as such, allowing equal time for classroom tutelage and practical work experience and spans eight years.

On the cost of education?
In a local context it may be considered to be expensive, but in a regional or global context we offer one of the most economical architectural courses. The CSA is presently negotiating with a prestigious Australian education provider and the benefit will be, that local students can choose to complete their studies at this institution and we can also try and attract regional applicants to the CSA via this link.

Our future objective is to offer the Australian qualification here with local tuition fees.

What did the SLIA do after the tsunami? Were there enough qualified professionals to oversee post tsunami reconstruction?
We have sufficient professionals in this country coupled with the technology and the know-how, to handle these types of situations.

Following the tsunami we were not hesitant in going forward to the Government and offering all of our services on a voluntary basis. Members of the SLIA also drafted a publication with over hundreds of designs that could be utilised during tsunami reconstruction.

In addition to this we appointed our architects to work on a voluntary basis at district level. A lot of SLIA members were thus involved in the reconstruction effort and the SLIA itself via donations completed two housing projects in the east and south.

I was recently in Thailand as part of a US Government travelling exhibition on coping with the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and while addressing the audience who had gathered their, they were all amazed at the efforts and contribution of the SLIA, given the size of our island and the strengths of our ranks.

Is everyone following the 'Bawa style?'
Energy and the environment have today become key issues especially to us architects. So whether we like it or not we have to look at ways of implementing sustainable architecture.

In fact the topic of the SLIA annual conference held earlier this year was 'Sustainable Architecture.' During the sessions we covered such aspects as sustainable design, using sustainable materials and designing low energy buildings.

It is simply because that this will become the requirement of the future that these concepts and styles are being embraced. Otherwise buildings will simply become too expensive for individuals to live and work in them.

Is technology diminishing or enhancing the profession?
Technology is a positive thing and as such it enhances our profession. Architects must use technology in order to produce better products. It is our sincere hope that all architects of the future produced by the island are technologically sound and offer excellence in design, management skills, a business like approach and most of all an ethical standpoint.

Is the garden city of Colombo a distant memory with the boom in condominium living?
I do not think the boom in condominiums is a bad thing given that in a city the size of Colombo, the density of structures is not enough, if you want to compete with the other successful cities in the region.

If you were to compare our skyline with that of say Hong Kong or Singapore, we still have a long way to go. Our population density is high and thus we must create a city that reflects this context.

However our approach must take on a more three-dimensional and planned one. The architect must couple their knowledge and skills and also give consideration to the bigger picture of urban design and town planning.

I am certainly not advocating that all trees should be cut down to be replaced by cement jungles, but instead we must take this opportunity to learn from other cities that have navigated this complex dilemma and turned out environments that offer the resident a healthy balance of living and breathing.

We are not learning from the mistakes of other nations who have gone before us.

On what sets apart Asian design?
Asian architecture is much more vibrant given the richness of our culture as and when compared to let us say certain European disciplines. Asians have deep roots embedded into their culture and thus try to reflect this in their structures and designs.

We may not be ahead in technology but when it comes to integrating aesthetics within an urban or rural environment it is my opinion that we have a lot to offer.

Your advice for a prospective architect?
Go ahead and do it, for you will never repent!