I Am Paradise Road



In 1987 Shanth Fernando opened his first retail store down Flower Road. It marked the beginning of redefining lifestyle in Sri Lanka. Through his versatility and love of art and timeless classics, his brand Paradise Road has made an indelible mark in the retail and hospitality industry of Sri Lanka. Today Shanth Fernando is an internationally recognised lifestyle connoisseur and is given credence for introducing inimitable flair and sophistication to Sri Lankan lifestyle. Reaching 25 years of nurturing his passion Shanth Fernando reflects on a journey that has been challenging and equally rewarding. It is the story of single minded vision and unrelenting perseverance. A story of success.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

It has been 25 years since the inception of Paradise Road. Can you tell us about your journey?
The journey of Paradise Road has been a tedious one; 25 years of persevering and starting from scratch. I have had many opportunities in my life. When opportunity knocked, I answered. When I first came to Sri Lanka I walked around and found few stores that appealed to me. Then I drove down Flower Road and saw a very simple modern building being erected and found its owner. I leased it and that was the beginning of Paradise Road. I travelled everywhere, designed products and created my collection. It took about four or five months for the first Sri Lankan to come and buy from me. I already had foreigners buying from me and I developed the business from there. There was nothing comparable to what I was doing in the market place.

At first I had only two employees. I would be there early morning, do the deliveries, sweep the shop and at times when there were no customers, I would fall asleep from exhaustion behind the counter. The boys would quickly wake me when a customer arrived and I'd get up and give a smile. That is how I began.

As Paradise Road grew, Habitat, a reputed design company in UK head hunted me and wanted me to be their agent. I felt quite flattered at first, but I also felt shy that I only had this store. Then the building down Dharmapala Mawatha came to my attention. It was falling apart and I approached the owner who was known to me and they decided to rent it out to me. I soon converted it to what was then known as Paradise Road Promenade. It was a beautiful store and that became the flagship store.

Incidentally, Habitat had selected samples from my own collection and wanted to import them. They offered five percent commission for everything including quality control and handling. I said that one could not afford to do all that on just five percent, taking into account the infrastructure needed and transport for quality controllers to go out to factories and supervise. When I made my point and turned away they said, "we are Habitat" and I said "I am Paradise Road" and I never became an exporter. I also opened a store at Trans Asia, but it was difficult to

manage and I went on to open a beautiful store at The Jaic Hilton. That was not successful either due to its location.

Then The Gallery Café was opened at Alfred House Gardens. This housed the former offices of renowned architect Geoffrey Bawa who personally entrusted his beloved building to my care. As it so happened the house next door to The Gallery Café was also available. Consequently, I closed the shop at The Jaic Hilton and opened Paradise Road Studio next to The Gallery Café. Thereafter, many came up to me and asked what was next, and some suggested that I should open a boutique hotel. But I said ‘no, never hotels’, as I knew what responsibilities it entailed.

Later Sunethra Bandaranaike, a close friend of mine contacted me. She wanted to dispose of some furniture as she was moving out of her mother’s house and wanted to lease Tintagel out to an embassy. I enquired after the rent and requested that it be rented out to me to open a boutique hotel. She consulted her siblings who agreed. It took two years and eight months to refurbish and transform Tintagel, complete with ten suites with attached bathrooms, a private dining room, library, bar and massage room. It was entirely funded by me and while refurbishment was in progress, I paid rent for the building. That is how Tintagel came to be and it has been a challenging undertaking.

This was followed by a resort hotel, one that Geoffrey Bawa had created in the ‘Mohotti Walauwa’ in Bentota. It was owned by a good acquaintance of mine and she offered to lease it to me. It took me over a year to refurbish The Villa. Since it was built during a different era, I had to rebuild and transform the spaces to suit today’s comforts and in Paradise Road taste. It has already won many accolades, it has been named as The Resort Hotel and last year it won the Tourist Board Award. Similarly, The Gallery Cafe has won the Tourist Board Award and it has also won the Miele award for two consecutive years. Incidentally I was made a Kalasuri by President Chandrika Kumaratunga. These are the recognitions I have earned for all my efforts.

Back Then The Kind Of Style And Living That Could Be Found In Sri Lanka Was Quite Stale And Needed What Was Current. And That Is What I Brought In

What was the thinking behind Paradise Road?

When I first returned 25 years ago, I saw an opportunity for Sri Lanka. Back then the kind of style and living that could be found in Sri Lanka was quite stale and needed what was current. And that is what I brought in. Initially I started with a neutral black and white palette and sophisticated the designs of local craft that was available.

That was not an easy task, it entailed going to the villages, discovering craftsmen and their talents and then sophisticating their products. That meant reducing the ornamentation of product designs that they were doing. If you take traditional products of Sri Lanka, designs have been added on over the years and as a result, these products have become over done.I believe ‘less is more’ and that way we make a product that has appeal. Today, there is a market for simpler things that are easy to live with along with the occasional elaborate item, but not in excess. In the end that is what I introduced; simple designs and colours since that is the way the world developed in design.

It took me a long time to find craftsmen who could deliver what I want. Eventually, when I found them, I designed for them. For instance I sophisticated the kurini bath pettiya, the cane box in which the farmer’s wife takes rice to the fields. I simplified it and lacquered the wooden centre on the lid in a black and white striped design. Similarly, I took baskets and white washed them, then I went to porcelain factories and sought clean white porcelain of good design.

These were simple ideas. Very often it’s all about reducing ornamentation to sophisticate a product to make it appealing to today’s tastes. Now we are talking about taste which has lasted 25 years, giving it timeless appeal. That was my main objective and that is how I created all these products. Once I know an individual’s talent, I can work with them. I have the ability to take a piece of paper and draw something, work out the design and the craftsman knows what I am talking about. Thereafter, he uses his own skill. What I do is design the product to fit within my concept. It was 25 years ago that a candle-maker was making what they called iti pahan or clay lamps with a candle inside. I saw that the candle was separate and it could float. From then on we started making ‘floating candles’ and as a result I introduced that concept to Sri Lanka 25 years ago. Similarly, we had table mats, pots and cutlery made in Sri Lanka. It is all about creating a portfolio of designs whether it is with fabric, terra cotta, metal or candles to suit a concept.

I brought ideas from overseas and translated them. In the end what is design, anyway other than a variation of a theme? You take an idea and keep changing it. On my travels overseas, I buy samples and I am inspired by much of what I see. I attend trade fairs, get inspired and develop ideas. I come back and convey them to my craftsmen to produce. In the 25 years of business, I have rejected only ten percent of what I have produced.

I would also like to take credit for changing the shopping hours of Colombo. When I started Paradise Road the shops opened at nine in the morning and closed at five in the evening. I began opening my shop at ten in the morning since no one comes shopping until then, and closed at seven in the evening. Thereafter, everyone else in Colombo changed their shopping hours and I take credit for that. People don't realise that these are trends that I have set. Moreover, we opened everyday of the week including Sundays. In fact my shops are closed only for three or four days a year and we are open on Poya holidays as well. Those are the days that people are free to go out and look for something to buy. Families can get together and go to a restaurant. It is all about being realistic and practical.

I Am Not Interested In Competition. My Only Competition Is Myself… My Mission In Life Is To Succeed

Could you talk about some of the challenges that you have faced, particularly in catering to a niche market?

I am not interested in competition. My only competition is myself. If you succeed, you make money. My mission in life is to succeed, but along the way there have been people who have stolen from me. Even one's own staff can be dishonest. You stress yourself trying to preach ethics, but it is not something that can be easily taught. This is one of the key problems we have as well.

In doing the nature of work that I do, those on the outside feel that this is all very easy. There are individuals who take the easy way out. For instance, they have taken my designs and ideas, approached my suppliers that I cultivated or developed over the years and have enticed them by paying them a fraction more. To accomplish what I have, I had to sacrifice considerable time, energy and stay extremely focused. It would not have been possible otherwise. My family has supported me along the way and I was given the freedom to do what I wanted to

do, but the greatest challenge has been the resentful nature of others in the market, which has led to the duplication of MY work and MY story.

People know that I am genuine and that these are my ideas. It can be hurtful when people try to mimic what I am doing. Imitation is a form of flattery but duplication is obscene. In order to imitate, we should only be inspired.

Wherever you go there are those who try to pull the carpet from under one's feet and try to do what you are doing. Nevertheless, I still carry on. Challenge is also needed in life? If it was easy, wouldn't everyone be doing the same thing?

Could you talk about your interest in art and how this has been nurtured through Paradise Road Galleries?
I was always interested in art and design. Right through my school career, I won every art prize. I started life by managing my sister's hotel at the age of 20, and at the age of 21 I was managing my own guest house of five rooms in Mt Lavinia. But I was always interested in art and I have been an enthusiastic art collector. Today I have a substantial and important collection of Sri Lankan art.

Art is an obsession with me. During my time in Australia, I knew the work of all the Australian artists during that time. I knew them by name and style, but I never bought that art, because it did not relate to Sri Lanka. I only buy art that is relative. The only Australian artist that I did purchase was Donald Friend who had links with the Bawa brothers. I call my collection the Paradise Road Collection. Most of the current established artists have exhibited with me at Paradise Road Galleries. I have the single largest private collection of Belgian artist Saskia Pintelon, art from the ten members of the '43 Group; George Keyt, Harry Pieris, Justin Daraniyagala, Ivan Peries, Beling, Manjusri, Collette, Richard Gabriel, Lionel Wendt, and George Claessen. For me, it is like divine providence, that I was able to purchase these works of art at the time I did.

Through Paradise Road Galleries I have fostered artists of international repute. There have been many instances where artists have exhibited with me and found success. There was a Pakistani artist, Ali Kazim, who I discovered during an exhibition at a SAARC country artists' camp and consequently held his very first one

man show at Paradise Road Galleries. Today he is an internationally acclaimed and sought after artist.

What sets Paradise Road apart from the rest?
I have never focused only on tourism, although my products, and whatever I do are attractive to discerning tourists and expatriates interested in good design. At Paradise Road one is not going to find masks, head turbines, flutes or straw hats. Instead one will find sophisticated handicrafts from Sri Lanka. For example, one of the most popular items is my alphabet series. I have mugs, bowls and dinner plates with the Sinhala or Tamil alphabet printed on them. Similarly, I have bags with these alphabets and they are all clean and uncluttered in design. I have also designed sarongs with the alphabet drawn at the bottom as a border.

I don’t own a single factory and it is the craftsmen who own and run their workshops. If I had opened factories, Paradise Road would not have lasted 25 years. Running a factory takes a different type of person and needs different infrastructure.I remained in retail all these years, however I do have people who import from me. They select from what I have and ship it themselves, but we do not take orders from overseas as that would have turned the business into something I dislike. I despise commercialism.

There was an incident that took place that convinced me against exporting handicrafts. A tourist who visited Sri Lanka bought a mat for Rs 100. He found it beautiful and was inspired to start a business. He got the idea to import these mats to Germany, he bought a sample and went to Germany where he procured large orders from major super markets and departmental stores. In importation, you have to consider freight, packing, storage, transportation, and so on. He worked out a price and it was still attractive to do.

When he returned to Sri Lanka, he approached the craftsmen of the village from where he bought these samples and made an offer to buy 3,000 mats a month from them. Although he expected to re-negotiate price considering the volume, their response was that 3,000 mats would cost them more to produce. They would need to build a big factory, employ more people and purchase raw material in bulk as it took them three days to produce one mat that they sold at Rs 100.

This has kept me away from exporting handicrafts. Craftsmen cannot grasp volume production. However developed they may be only factories can do that and these people do not have the infrastructure or the education to expand business. Therefore, I keep craftsmen occupied by giving them orders that they can fulfill and thereby cut my coat according to my cloth.

As far as tourism is concerned, of course, we do need tourists to expand our businesses. We have discerning clientele coming in, as we are listed in numerous sources of repute. International journals and travel directories have automatically given Paradise Road recognition. I have even been referred to as the Terence Conran of Asia by Wallpaper magazine.

One of my greater achievements was when I was published along with Sri Lanka's leading designers in the book 'Beyond Bawa'; renowned names such as Ena De Silva, Barbara Sansoni and Laki Senanayake. An achievement that came from plenty of hard work, focus, sacrifice and struggle.

To This Day I Have Remained Completely Transparent, I Don't Maintain Double Books, And That Is Not Something I Am Interested In. Money Creates The Worst Kind Of Stress And There Are More Important Things In Life To Stress About

What has made Paradise Road the success that it is today?
I want to succeed in whatever I do and I have succeeded. It has been a challenge and it has not been easy. I opened my store during a turbulent period in the country. But I kept my doors open till the last minute till the commencement of curfew. The business was crawling with a turnover of Rs 8,000-10,000 a day. Today, we turnover hundreds and thousands through our efforts.

When I started my business I had only three employees, now I have nearly 200. To this day I have remained completely transparent, I do not maintain double books, and that is not something I am interested in. Money creates the worst kind of stress and there are more important things in life to stress about. I am not that ambitious to borrow money from banks and put myself under pressure. Instead I roll my money and work according to what I have. I have succeeded by having these strong ethics. I pay all my taxes and all my employees on time. I owe nothing to nobody.

Therefore, I have the freedom to think, to design, to live the way I want to live and the ability to sleep in peace. That has been my success.

People find me indifferent and reserved. They do not understand me but that is the way I want to be. By being the way I am, I have time for myself and my own mission in life. I am what I am. I am in my restaurant like a bad smell 90 percent of the time that I am in Sri Lanka. My holidays are all business trips. In these 25 years, I have never gone on holiday. I attend trade fairs in Frankfurt, Paris, Bangkok, Singapore and China where I go for 'brain food'. I have no regrets in business.

What I do not like is when people take advantage of all my efforts. I have worked hard to get to where I wanted to go. There are people who take the easy way out by stealing my ideas and what I have nurtured. They spread rumours and call me arrogant. I wonder how many of them know me? Of course I am tough, you have to be eccentric to make it as far as I have.

I have never got anything for free in my life. There's nothing in life called a free lunch? That said I love to laugh and I love life my way. I like to amuse people but if I am misunderstood it is actually not my problem. I cannot make small talk or be fake. Nevertheless, I believe in what I do and I am content with myself.

If we look at the tourism industry in Sri Lanka, after the end of the war the country is aiming to attract up market tourists. What are your thoughts on this?

I think Sri Lanka needs to be a little more realistic. The world economy, particularly Europe, is collapsing and very soon people will not be able to do what they have been doing. We should target our market with caution. If we go to the market with too up market accommodation, we could end up in trouble. What have we got to offer? Colombo is being beautified, but we still do not have enough places to visit in Colombo.

I Have Never Got Anything For Free In My Life. There's Nothing In Life Called A Free Lunch? That Said I Love To Laugh And I Love Life My Way. I Like To Amuse People But If I Am Misunderstood It Is Actually Not My Problem. I Cannot Make Small Talk Or Be Fake. Nevertheless, I Believe In What I Do And I Am Content With Myself

What should Sri Lanka do to improve?
The country which is beautiful is getting to look cleaner. Take the old racecourse for example and how the grand stand has been transformed. All that is very beautiful. However, there is very little to keep one occupied in Colombo. If you take the museum, it houses such rare and beautiful artefacts but it has no tasteful or international appeal as it is very poorly presented. Sad, when there is so much exquisite history in every single object to be proudly shown off.

The Colombo Art Gallery is a disgrace. Even with so much good art in the country with many bequests in the likes of the David Paynter collection available, the Art Gallery houses very mediocre, and a very badly restored collection of art, even from our contemporary artists.

It is essential that we make Colombo a place to come and visit. We should have more happenings, events, and festivals. We need more cafés, popular places and nightlife.

Concluding thoughts?
All of Paradise Road is a story about Shanth Fernando. It is my taste and style. I like things which are classic but that which fits into today’s context of living. I am behind every single item in my stores and everything that makes the Paradise Road concept. That challenge will continue all my life.



