

Taste, Timeless, Style

Posted on



Doyen of style Udayshanth Fernando, known for his Paradise Road lifestyle concept stores, speaks frankly about his past, present and future.

By Harin Fernando

The beginning

I have had a love for design and art all through my life. Right through my school career, I won the art prize. My mother never came to a prize giving, as she often would say 'you are winning prizes for talent and not for effort.' This continued and by the time I managed to get my first, form prize, sadly my mother was no longer living, as I had lost her at the age of 15.

My mother was my greatest inspiration, she is the one who discovered my talent and fostered it. I had a father who did not want me to paint because he said 'art will get you nowhere.'

All my life I have been achieving and succeeding in what I did and I think to myself 'would not my father have been proud of me?' These are all spiritual things, as I had lost my parents by the age of 19 and thereafter I went on to become a self made man.

I lost most of my inheritance; most of it was taken over by the government of the time. My mother wanted me to be an architect but my father was advised by Valentine Gunasekera who was an architect of repute and a family friend that the market was saturated.

The first job I ever had was at Grant Advertising and I hated it because in those days one neither had Letraset nor computers and I was drawing 'Bata' signs day in, day out.

I left Grants and went off to India, to do my London A Levels. Upon my return, my sister had moved out of the house I was born in and I didn't have a home. My older sister ran a guesthouse called 'Lake Lodge' down Alwis Terrace and at the age of 20 I was made a manager of that establishment. I remained there for one and a half years, lodging on the premises.

I Love The Warmth Of My People And I Love My Country. I Also Saw The Potential In The Country And These Were The Reasons I Decided To Return.

Following this, at the age of 21, I opened my own guesthouse called 'Mount Bay Inn' down De Saram Place in Mount Lavinia. This five-bedroom property was a success. Those were the days of 'Flower Power,' Santana, Carol King and Simon and Garfunkel, and we would simply dance till the wee hours and go for a swim in the sea. This was my first introduction to business, it gave me the opportunity to combine my love for art and design with hotels. I then went on to subsequently work in hotels in the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia and my last job was at the Hyatt in Sydney.

Life Down Under

The birth of my second daughter was my turning point. There was this energy within me as I belonged to a family of businessmen. My father, grandfather and uncles were all landed proprietors and businessmen. Business was something I always had within me, even my mother was very business orientated.

I set up a very successful business in Australia called 'Art of Play.' This venture commenced whilst my wife was pregnant with our second daughter. I started importing items from Barefoot, Sri Lanka and selling them in Australia.

From there I progressed into purchasing child oriented gift ware from all parts of Europe and I had agencies for some of the finest labels of toys from Germany and France.

Whilst running my business in Australia, I was featured in possibly every lifestyle magazine ranging from Belle, to Vogue and Vogue Entertaining. I even cooked Sri Lankan fare for Vogue Entertaining in 1986. I used to design my own products and got them made in Sri Lanka by Magpek, a company which specialised in hand painted toys and gift ware.

I presented my goods at Australian Trade Fairs and won five 'best stand' awards. I once featured some very simple papier-mâché geese that I had made in Sri Lanka in a number of different attitudes. During a trade fair held at the Sydney Show Grounds, inspired, I went out and purchased some 'file plastic' (similar to Rexene) in dull gold which I affixed to the walls and floorboards of the stall. I then went to the stables nearby and hired some bales of fresh grass, that I placed in the stall and then mounted the geese upon them. This simplicity saw me receiving a 'Best Stand' Award.

In Australia, I grew up with my children, I bought them the best of toys. We lived in a very desirable part of Sydney – Mossman. We had every material comfort imaginable.

The falling of the Australian dollar meant that I could not import from Europe anymore and circumstances had it that I had to come to Sri Lanka to produce goods. It was when I came back here that I realised that I belonged in Sri Lanka.

I love the warmth of my people and I love my country. I also saw the potential in the country and these were the reasons I decided to return.

I never bought property in Australia or else I would never have returned to Sri Lanka. As I do not like debt now borrowing and I prefer to purchase whatever I want outright. A lesson I learnt from my father's mistakes.

Return to Serendib

I didn't actually see my inheritance, but I earned my own collateral in life. I earned more than what I should have inherited from my father and I am the happier man.

I developed myself and have a family that is extremely supportive that inspired me to launch Paradise Road.

I came back to Sri Lanka after running a business in Australia, to run it by remote control from here. (Although I had left Sri Lanka, never to return). After having done business with Sri Lanka and visiting Sri Lanka often I realised I belonged here and I realised that I did not want to grow old in Australia.

Upon my return I went to a craft exhibition by reputed architect Tilak Samarawickrema, a consultant employed by the ILO to design and refine crafts for export production. At the exhibition I realised the potential of our people. Thereafter I began visiting villages and manufacturing my own products.

When I started Paradise Road I would go and buy kavum baskets and paint them in white,

this was in line with the initial Paradise Road theme of black and white.

Incidentally 'Paradise Road' changed shopping hours in Colombo. Shops used to open at 9 AM and close at 5 PM. I changed it to 10 AM to 7 PM and opened everyday of the week, including public holidays.

Whilst importing into Australia I dealt with a French company called Toys for Today who were on 'Rue de Paradis' and on my way in a taxi at a traffic light stop I looked up and seeing the road sign, I translated it into English and it became the name of my business - Paradise Road.

One of the first products I ever did was diagonal stripes in black and white in batik. I love the irregularity of the lines in Batik in comparison to block or screen printed design.

I used the techniques and skills developed by people such as Ena de Silva to do batik.

My diagonal stripe cushions were the first thing Geoffrey Bawa ever bought from me, and to this day it lies as a signature in his home and is displayed proudly on his sofa.

Paradise Road succeeded and in 1990, I was head hunted by Habitat's CEO, Vittorio Radice, who used to come to Sri Lanka for ayurveda treatment and discovered Paradise Road. In a feature in the tabloid of the Financial Times of London he recommended, 'shops not to miss' - Paradise Road in Sri Lanka.

He sent a team from Habitat to try and make me their agent. I was flattered at first as those were hard times in Sri Lanka and having an export business could have been lucrative. Habitat had nominated factories that I was to work with, and when I visited those factories there were my Paradise Road samples and they were getting these reproduced. On asking them 'what's in this for me?' They replied 'five percent'. I replied 'you're buying this for peanuts and all I get is five percent?' And they said 'yes, but we are Habitat' and I said 'yes, but I am Paradise Road' and I never went ahead with the deal.

I could never have afforded on 'five percent' the infrastructure necessary to handle their requirements for packaging as they were a chain of stores for which different quantities of goods had to be separately packed.

I even had Bloomingdales come knock on my door once and I refused them. I believe in cutting my coat according to my cloth.

Whilst Importing Into Australia I Dealt With A French Company Called Toys For Today Who Were On 'Rue De Paradis' I Translated It Into English And It Became The Name Of My Business - Paradise Road.

Why didn't I become an exporter? Because I learnt one thing. I will tell you a story. There was a German tourist who came to Sri Lanka and on his way down south he stopped at Kalutara and bought a mat for Rs 100. Whilst lying on the beach in Bentota in an inspired moment he decided that he could import the mats into Germany and sell them to Neckerman, Kaufhof etc. He worked out his costs and began to take orders. 1000 pieces every two months were ordered and he returned to Kalutara to place his order and re-negotiate. The villagers replied 'if you want 1000 pieces, the price will definitely go up.' The confused buyer said 'but in my country if you buy in volume, you get it cheaper.' The villagers lacked capacity, infrastructure, capital and discipline. So that was the end of the German's dream.

Upon hearing this I thought to myself; 'I do not want stress in my life,' so I declared 'Shanth Fernando, never an exporter.'

A Passion for Art & Design

I have an enormous collection of good Sri Lankan art and I am the Chairman of the George Keyt Foundation exhibition committee. My first love is art and I do a lot on behalf of this passion, sometimes bordering on an obsession. Paradise Road Galleries is by far the most successful commercial gallery in Colombo. It has given tremendous support and been a platform for many less privileged artists to succeed.

My life revolves around design and art. Even my first advertisement in Explore Sri Lanka was a painting of a Paradise Road serviette, chequered with yellow and red with a black border, without any description, why you ask? Simply because 'less is more?'

You have to understand that whatever I have or do is timeless. I do not believe in gimmicks. If I buy a pair of shoes or a shirt, it is classic. During the day I wear white shirts and at night preferably black. If I wear brown shoes then my belt, watchstrap and glasses must also be brown. God is in the details.

My palette is neutral and in my design thinking, one will use a neutral background and bring colour from the objects that one introduces.

I practice what I preach. To me design is a way of life. My mother fostered it in me and I made it work. I can turn around and tell you today I was able to succeed in Sri Lanka.

When I came to Sri Lanka, the only interesting lifestyle shop here, was Barefoot. It is a shop I have always respected. At first when I opened Paradise Road, people saw me as a threat to Barefoot. But I was never a threat, we inspired each other and developed lifestyle in Sri Lanka together. We made a market that made householders more sensitive to design and made their lifestyle more interesting.

We were trying to make a sort of style, that was actually started off by Geoffrey Bawa, whom I have great regard for.

Leasing No. 2 Alfred House Road

Geoffrey Bawa was a very good acquaintance of mine. I use the term 'acquaintance' or else I do not think, I would have been his tenant at No. 2 Alfred House Road which I converted into Paradise Road Galleries, housing The Gallery Café, which is today world famous and Conde Nast Traveller recommended as, 'The only place to eat in Colombo!'

When I stopped working in hotels in 1982, I said 'I've stopped for life.' But I could not hide behind the fact that it was very much a part of me. When I discovered that No. 2 Alfred House Road was available, I approached Mr. Bawa and through a lot of politics was able to lease the property. He trusted me and my taste.

I Belong To That Era, When There Was A Design Movement Working To Change The Taste Of Sri Lankans. Therefore I Have A Lot Of Respect And Gratitude For Mr. Bawa. He Leased It To Me And I Made It Work And Succeed. All Said And Done, The Gallery Café Is Almost

Always Filled To Capacity. This Gives Me The Buzz I Want In Life.

We respected one another, he used to come to our home and we would entertain him and enjoy his company because he was an individual of impeccable taste with a wonderful eye and he was definitely a great inspiration in my life.

I belong to that era, when there was a design movement working to change the taste of Sri Lankans. Therefore I have a lot of respect and gratitude for Mr. Bawa.

I grew up at a time when the Grand Oriental Hotel became the Taprobane with an incredibly new style and this style was set by Mr. Geoffrey Bawa.

When I approached him, to lease No. 2, he asked 'what do you want to do with it?..... Not another Paradise Lost, I hope?' Thinking that I should be convincing, as this was my most favourite building in the world and having wanted to live in it, I replied 'No. Sir. It has the potential to become a gallery and I want it to become a gallery with a café attached.'

He leased it to me and I made it work and succeed. All said and done, The Gallery Café is almost always filled to capacity. This gives me the buzz I want in life. Once The Gallery Café was successful and on its feet, people asked me, 'why not a boutique hotel now, Shanth?

Tintagel

Deep within me hotels were inevitably a part of me, but I waited till opportunity knocked.

I came to visit Sunethra Bandaranaike a very close friend of mine to help her price the furniture she wanted to dispose of from Tintagel, their family home. She was on the verge of leasing it out to a foreign mission and she had negotiated the rent. At that point I offered to lease it, to convert it into a unique private hotel as I immediately saw the potential. After having consulted her siblings they agreed to lease this important building to me. Thus making it the biggest challenge of my life.

I took over two and a half years to develop Tintagel to what it is today. It was a labour of love and I travelled the world to buy furniture and fittings. I purchased the best. If it was a chandelier from Baccarrat, if it was a gilded mirror, I bought the real thing in Paris. To Get Political History Of This Strength, From A House, Anywhere In The World Is Rare. This Is The Importance Of Tintagel.

Architect Philip Weeraratne who assisted me in enhancing Tintagel for the conversion, was very tolerant and patient with me. I am not an architect but I know exactly what I want and he was humble enough to work with me. He repeatedly said, that he was 'learning' from me, a statement which I respected and took as a compliment.

It took only a year for the original building to be built in 1929 but it took me two and a half years to re-create it.

I doubt if they had the technology to build bathrooms upstairs in 1929. I had to create eight bathrooms upstairs as each room today is en-suite.

In as much as Mr. Bawa disciplined my vision in design I didn't wish to do the typical Bawa style at Tintagel. It is a colonial house and I wanted to decorate it, in today's international eclectic style.

Here, when you walk through you do not see Geoffrey Bawa, you might see his vision. Because from wherever you look everything is balanced. When I look back and say 'he was my guru and icon' this is actually because he was the foundation of my taste.

The style at Tintagel is Shanth Fernando at his best.

My colours are sometimes, sober, some of the rooms are dark and sophisticated. Every single thing was designed by me including the beds and the front gate. And it is all very striped and that is very 'Paradise Road.' I even had my carpets woven in Nepal.

My older daughter is a professional interior designer and she already has several beautiful projects to her credit. Tintagel was my baby and my greatest challenge in life and I wanted to do it on my own.

I wanted to do something that my country would be proud of.

There are very few houses in the world that have a comparable history with Tintagel,

Colombo. This was not built by the Bandaranaiques but by Dr Lucien de Zilwa, the Bandaranaike ancestral home is in Horagolla.

Tintagel was purchased in 1947 by Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike from Dr Lucien de Zilwa who occupied Tintagel in 1930, living a very aristocratic life with peacocks in the garden and stables in the back, hosting soirees for the French society.

The British military took charge of Tintagel to house 100 soldiers and upon its return to Dr Lucien de Zilwa (as described in his autobiography) it was a 'pitiful wreck,' he decided to sell it to Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike for less than what he had built it for. Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike had purchased the house for his son, S W R D Bandaranaike who was living with his wife and two daughters Sunethra and Chandrika at 'Wentworth' the home of Lionel Wendt on Guildford Crescent. It is only the Hon Anura Bandaranaike who was born at Tintagel.

S W R D was a minister of the first government after independence and then he went on to form the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna and in 1956, became the fourth Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. In 1959 he was shot on the verandah of Tintagel, and he succumbed to his injuries in hospital.

In 1960 his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike, became the world's first woman Prime Minister, and also the longest serving in the annals of Sri Lankan political history.

Anura Bandaranaike became leader of the opposition in 1984. He became speaker in 2000 and the minister of many ministries of government to date. Chandrika Bandaranaike progressively became Chief Minister, Prime Minister and then Sri Lanka's first woman President.

To get political history of this strength, from a house, anywhere in the world is rare. This is the importance of Tintagel.

My aim was to preserve Tintagel for posterity. I created what I thought was a unique private

hotel like no other. I wanted the finest fittings, the finest beds, a very fine kitchen and a collection of art and objet d'art, incomparable. The most comfortable bed I ever slept on was at the Grand Hyatt in Hong Kong. I asked the Purchasing Manager, where they came from? He said 'Slumberland in Australia' and I imported them without any hesitation.

Every bed has a feather mattress on top of the normal mattress to make the bed feel like a cloud. The feather mattress was more expensive than the actual mattress.

The lamps, the colour of the pool, the sculptures on the walls, were all designed by me, I did not let anyone interfere with what I chose. One might find some things provocative, I don't really mind, I like to be provocative!

To the Present

Today I travel to the best fairs in Europe. I go to Ambiente, in Frankfurt, Germany, Maison et Objet in Paris and I visit fairs in other parts of Asia as well. Price has never been a factor to me, I simply buy what I like and what I like has worked for me.

My older daughter, is today a confirmed and respected interior designer and my younger daughter is at the École hôtelière de Lausanne.

Today people know me for what I am and for what I have achieved in my country. I was bestowed the title of 'Kala Suri' in recognition of my contribution to Sri Lanka. I sell 'Taste, Timeless, Style' through my Paradise Road concept and Paradise Road is a design direction.

I created my own destiny and one needs a direction and I feel I chose the right direction. We all seek recognition and I was able to be recognised by the best critics in the world.

This is a driving force that makes me do what I do. At Tintagel there are ten suites and each absolutely individual, but the Paradise Road signature runs through.

Guiding Principles

I always advise that if one's family does not come from a business background, then one shouldn't get into business! It is something that is inculcated within you and you cannot buy

for money.

The main driving force in my life and I can say this honestly has been success and not money. For this I have put my heart and soul into every single business that I have had and what you must understand is that it is success that makes you money. It is not money that makes you successful.

I have a God given talent in design and art, which I foster and share. One of my greatest principles in life, is to care and to share. In essence my testimony is that I cheat nobody, I steal from nobody and I owe no one nothing. I desire a stress free life.

I want and believe in the best in whatever I do in my life.

My mother converted the home that I grew up into a gallery of my paintings. From the moment I got married, I stopped painting and my life became the canvas.

I always had a love for interior design and beautiful things. My mother would often tell me 'buy one good thing, rather than ten bits of rubbish.' Therefore I always worked to afford the best. I have instilled this very same principle in my children as well.

I travel the world, I educate myself, I research and I buy the best magazines. I have a large library of magazines and books on art, photography, design and philosophy.

I have more than 100 employees and they work with me. Sri Lanka is a very competitive environment with jealousy, envy, and a situation where one does not bat an eyelid to put another person down. They never try to fathom that Shanth Fernando's achievements have come from bloody hard work and this is all reward for effort. I sincerely believe that you reap what you sow.

I work from early morning till late at night. To make The Gallery Café succeed, I am there every single day, when I am in the country. 'Every evening I am there like a bad smell.' That

is the only way one can make a business succeed. I don't just sit down, I am there hands on. If I find that there is a shortcoming in service, I'll be there serving. If I find that we are short staffed behind the bar, I'll be there washing glasses. If there's a mess in the kitchen, I will be there with a mop. I do not care and I believe in the dignity of labour. If there happens to be a toothpick on the ground, I will pick it up and set an example as I believe in managing through example.

Since I am a self made man and it is my money I spend, I could be tough to work with. I once experienced a partnership in business and thereafter I don't believe in partnerships.

'Partners are meant for dancing' and the only partners in my business are my wife and two daughters. We work together but afford each other space. My family enhance my business and this I feel is the only way a business can succeed.

At this point I must say that this is my recipe and there are other successful people out there with different attitudes and recipes, whom I respect for their achievements. Society has referred to me as being 'egoistic,' 'self centred,' 'so full of himself' and 'arrogant,' and many other beautiful descriptions. In reality these only provoke me and are my driving force.

Paradise Road Studio House is a store that sells beautiful things from here and abroad. This is a store with an edge compared to my other store on Dharmapala Mawatha that stocks affordable gifts. I always believe that there is a market for beautiful things and one does pay for quality.

Paradise Road Studio House is an inspiration. Everything that I would not mind owning myself whatever the cost is at Paradise Road Studio House.

And as long as one is honest and pays one's taxes, one needs not to worry. Why? Because I believe there is nothing in life called a free lunch.

I am a workaholic and I work everyday. In a way my children have suffered through that,

Daddy was not around for everything, but then again Daddy needed his space. I enjoy space, because it gives me time to think, to be inspired and create ideas to put into use and above all to be myself.

If I were to see a good thing of anybody's it does not matter if it was Barefoot. I would be the first to advise anybody. I see no one as competition. It is unfortunate that in Sri Lanka there is a large tendency to copy those who are successful and in the process people look for short cuts. I have experienced a situation where my entire inventory was duplicated and where my style was tried to be imitated. Imitation is flattering, duplication is obscene. Nevertheless one can buy Shanth Fernando at a point of time, but nothing stops me as I only work with myself and not competition. I am not trying to tell you that I am a genius but I am one who is focused and knows where he wants to go.

I go shopping but I don't always have to buy. I window shop, to inspire myself. I have the ability and can design something instantly, which I believe as true talent. Everything I sell and have produced here in Sri Lanka is designed by me. Every fabric and colour combination, has my signature.

I know myself and there are very few people who actually know me. How many friends does one have in life? You can count them with the fingers on one's hand. I believe that a true friend cries with you and not for you.

The Biggest Problem With A Lot Of Human Beings Is That We Worry For And Interfere With The Lives Of Other People, But It Is Not Worry, We Are Actually Ridiculing Them, Because We Think We Are Better Than They Are..

I loathe hypocrisy and two faced individuals. What I have to say, I say to anyone's face. The majority of people favour diplomacy? What is diplomacy? I patronise nobody! I can forgive but is it humanly possible to forget?

I know what I want and I am not here to make friends with everybody. What others see as arrogance I see as productivity.

Let people think what they want to think, God has not given us the powers to think what other people are thinking?

These are the rules by which I live and it is the discipline in every single thing I do, discipline in what I choose, discipline in how I run my business and discipline through which I manage my life. My problems are my problems. My way of life, is my way of life. The biggest problem with a lot of human beings is that we worry for and interfere with the lives of other people, but it is not worry, we are actually ridiculing them, because we think we are better than they are.

So those are my achievements in life and those are my driving forces. I have not, nor will ever compete with anyone except myself. Those are my philosophies in life and my point of view.

How would you like to be remembered?

As someone who made the lives of others rich or poor, better. Whether it was via style, taste or financially if there was a need, also as one who might have taught others to care and share.

Having grown up in a family where my father spent all his life building collateral for his children., that was later partially nationalised, one realises that material things are actually temporary.

We come with nothing and we leave with nothing. All we have is just days in our lives and achievements. We can only be remembered for the good we have done. We can only leave positive trails behind.

Unfortunately in Sri Lanka as we are not a people to see the good and positive in others, to succeed is a challenge. Jealousy is a curse in this country. One does not like to see another succeed, if they see someone succeed they try to pull him down.

I can proudly say that I was brought up in a family where we were taught to respect both the rich and the poor and where I was taught to succeed and not to compete.

I had a mother who was very house proud, but I think I live better than my parents did and I hope my children live better than I do. So it is a process of refinement. You have a

foundation and you build and from there you build further. If you read 'I am ok, you are ok.' They say a man is made in the first four years of his life because those are the basics through which he relates to things. I had parents who were sensitive to good living. I was thereby afforded the opportunity to develop my talents.

I was the secretary of the Student Christian Movement at St. Thomas College Mount Lavinia and I had a very Christian upbringing, but today I am universal. I believe in one God and I believe that God is good. So it is the good in you that is Godly and it is the evil in you that belongs to the devil. I strongly believe that we reap what we sow.