



Plate 1: Serenity. The simple lines of the lobby and dining areas mirrored in the Reflecting Pool. (Tropical Villas).

VINOD JAYASINGHE

A PRACTICE PROFILE



Architect Vinod Jayasinghe, a product of the University of Moratuwa, began his career working under the guidance of Archt. Geoffrey Bawa at Edwards Reid & Begg, where he was involved in several projects including The Royal Oceanic Hotel in Negombo. Since then, he had the opportunity of working in collaboration with several local and foreign consultants including the Swedish Architect Johannes De Leeuw and David Scott Architects of London. He began an independent architectural practice under the name of 'Environmental Studios', during which period he completed the Tropical Villas Hotel and the Jetwing House Interior and many other projects. He currently practices under the name of 'Vinod Jayasinghe Associates'.

Approaching the subject of Design, he believes in "... starting the design process not with the brief but with an idea or a feeling. This *idea* represents the essence of the building, the kind of place we want to have, its absolute being and its intrinsic nature". A space he believes must be invented embodying the idea, "... manipulate the structure, the properties of enclosure, size & scale, light and texture as well as the order of spaces to suit that initial *idea*, keeping closely in mind the all important usefulness of the building".

Discussion of his practice of design frequently brings up the words, 'discipline', 'context' and 'regional flavour'. Speaking of 'Discipline', while acknowledging the wealth of it gained

(as lessons in 'control') from his experience with Geoffrey Bawa, a great emphasis is placed on what could be learnt from the teachings of Buddhist Philosophy and the simple serenity of the Buddhist Temple. This he believes has provided great inspiration where discipline is concerned and how Architecture must relate to people. The Temple, whatever the proportions of its components, never alienates the people, but elevates their spirit by putting their mind at rest to question (might one contrast perhaps with the Gothic Cathedrals which used their sheer proportions to behumble and evoke unquestioning faith?). Furthermore, he adds, these components relate with ease to each other to create such a setting that what other colour but the colour of the Saffron Robe could complete the picture?

The topic at this point of discussion, presents the most appropriate time to take a brief glance at Tropical Villas Hotel (SLIA Design Award in Open Category, 1996), one of the best known and appreciated of his work. The Tropical Villas is a small-scale 50 room hotel owned by Jetwing Hotels, and situated close to the beach of Beruwala on Galle Road.

Faced with the task of designing a hotel on a tight two and a half acres with absolutely no 'support', not even a glimpse of the famous beaches though they were so close, he had also the constraint of a tight budget to manage with. His design was conceptualised in the form of a "large Court yard House",

and introvert space focused on the centre garden. The pool area was made prominent, a large pool being essential. The existing vegetation was preserved for as far as possible, leaving it almost completely intact in the centre area, making it an integral part of the design.

Two barrier elements were devised to ensure the quality of privacy in the design. The site was separated entirely from the Galle Road with the Public Building, which consists of a blank wall on that side (except for the few high windows on the upper floor bar area), and opens out towards the rest of the complex. This leaves the main entrance door through the Reception Area the only visual contact with the busy road. Opposite the road side, on the Western boundary where a beach front would have been, is the second barrier element. This, a long twelve bedroom block (in contrast to separate organisation of rooms elsewhere in the hotel) is meant to provide visual cover of the adjoining land. This block containing the public areas, as well as the room blocks (or 'Villas'), contains "simple lines" where their design and layout is concerned. Peaceful and non-aggressive with colour just where necessary.

Especially because the site had no access to the beach, the type of room was of extreme importance, and was designed in the form of a Villa. The arrangement was oriented more towards a complete home, providing individuality and privacy, making the room a strong point of the design. The outsides of the villas are subdued in

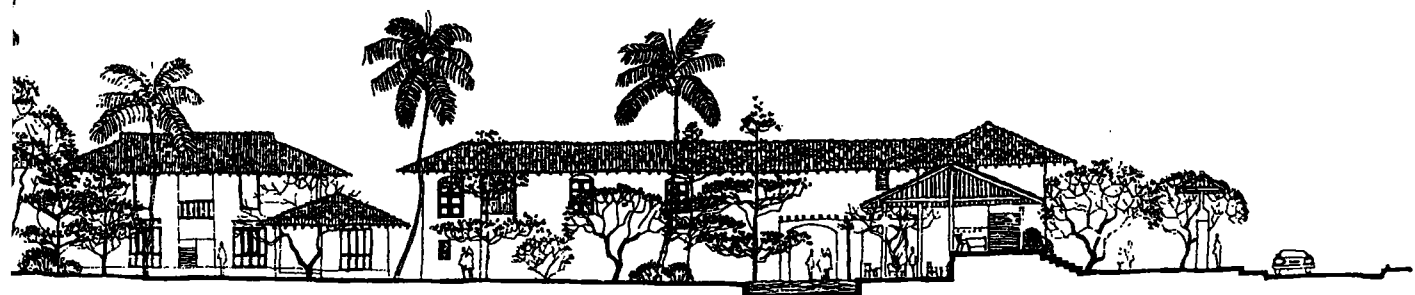


Plate 2: A lengthwise section of Tropical Villas.

colour & easy on the eye and the landscape. The room interiors, however, are enriched with the use of the colourful furnishings. Like the image house of a local Buddhist temple, it is colour contained and enclosed by the subdued exterior.

Coming to the topic of Regional Flavour, he believes the effects of the region are not to be denied in a people oriented art, as is Architecture. What we could call Sri Lankan Architecture, was enriched through the ages with the mingling of arts and cultures of the Indian Subcontinent, the Greek, Chinese and Moorish traders, and later on, that of the colonising Europeans. The regional flavour spoken of here is therefore to be achieved by the use of that heritage, whether it is found here or borrowed from our neighbours. The context then becomes a combination of the immediate region, its traditions, and activities taking place in it plus the activities to take place within the

proposed development. The palette of merits of the greater Region is available for you to enrich whatever the *idea* that sparks your design.

This thinking is illustrated most evidently in the Jetwing House Interior (the recipient of the SLIA award for Interior Design 1996). This interior was created for the Head Offices of Jetwing Hotels & Jetwing Travels, the same client. The Ground Floor contains the Hotel Reservation Office and the Air Ticketing section, while the First and Second Floors consist of the offices of Jetwing Travels Ltd. and Jetwing Hotels Ltd. respectively. (The building, which is located at No. 46/26 Nawam Mawatha, consists of six storeys and basement car park, and was designed by Mihindu Keerthiratne Associates.)

The intent of these office interiors was to carry a local identity in a modern office space, introducing the mainly foreign clientele visiting these offices a

tradition in Art, Craft and Architecture of Sri Lanka, the composition also adding the quality of liveliness in its contrast to formal office spaces.

The composition employs Painted Timber Columns in partitions and Timber Doors with traditional paintings. Decorative flat iron details over the doors are derived from the shapes of the traditional "Makara Thorana". Sand coloured floor tiles are said to have been used with the effect of the "Weli Maluwa" (Sand Courtyard) in mind. The floors of the lobby areas, done of rock finished tiles. The short walls in the partitions contain triangular openings, a beautifully proportioned element found in the traditional Kandyan architecture. Bamboo Tats used in place of curtains complete the overall effect.

The walls of the Ground Floor are painted an Old Blue colour in keeping with the carefully selected colour



Plate 3: Twin cubicles in the Jetwing House interior with the doors & columns painted with traditional designs. The quarter height partition walls with the triangular openings to complete the touch.

scheme of the Ticketing Counter, while the upper floors consist of a mud (yellow-beige) colour. These colours along with the sand coloured flooring and the Bamboo Tats had been selected with the idea of creating a perfect background for the painted columns and the paintings on the doors. All furniture used in these office spaces, with the exception of a few antique reproductions, were designed by the architect to conform to the intended effect.

The interior of one of the upper floors of the same building designed later on for the use of LTU, another tour operator, consists of less striking and more sedate composition of timber panel doors and sets of wide louvers. These are painted a faded blue-green as was to be seen in some of the famous shops along the Galle Road in the Balapitiya area until quite recent times (another legacy regrettably lost). The effect, obviously, is the softening of the otherwise cold and standard modern office environment.

The legacy of the greater Region can sometimes influence him to the extent of an entire design concept, as he illustrates with an unnamed project of very small-scale hotel type, still in initial design stage, carrying almost a Moorish or Mediterranean touch in its public areas. The sketches of three storey room blocks are reminiscent of the same Mediterranean quality or perhaps slightly that of urban housing of Renaissance Europe, may be that of the Portuguese period Sri Lanka, although certain 'modern' elements are present.

Commenting on the use of traditional elements of building and of his own pronounced use of antique reproductions in some of the interiors he states that "... qualities inherited from the past can become a discipline for the experiments of today". The use of historical elements or even styles when done without regard to their inherent disciplines is generally scoffed



Plate 4: Modern furniture fits in neatly with the painted doors and partitions of the LTU Interior.

at by those who are educated in the subject, while where it is successfully done combined with local traditions, it is classified broadly into (perhaps) 'Vernacular Post-Modern'. (For example, I would suppose, a column of a Vitruvian Classical Order, say Ionic, would have to have a diameter that depends mathematically on its height, otherwise it not being Ionic, and not being qualified to carry that particular capitol, contrary to most examples we see around Colombo. (The point, however, is valid to all traditions). The architectural legacy of

history, according to Vinod should be taken more seriously. The styles of the past had to evolve out of restrictions and the solutions to them, which resulted in their Discipline. Depending on the scale and context (as we defined above) of a project, some times the study of some historical styles can produce a solution, which can be made rather effective by the addition of some such elements in their proper discipline.

The best example of this, on the subject, may be the new project of the

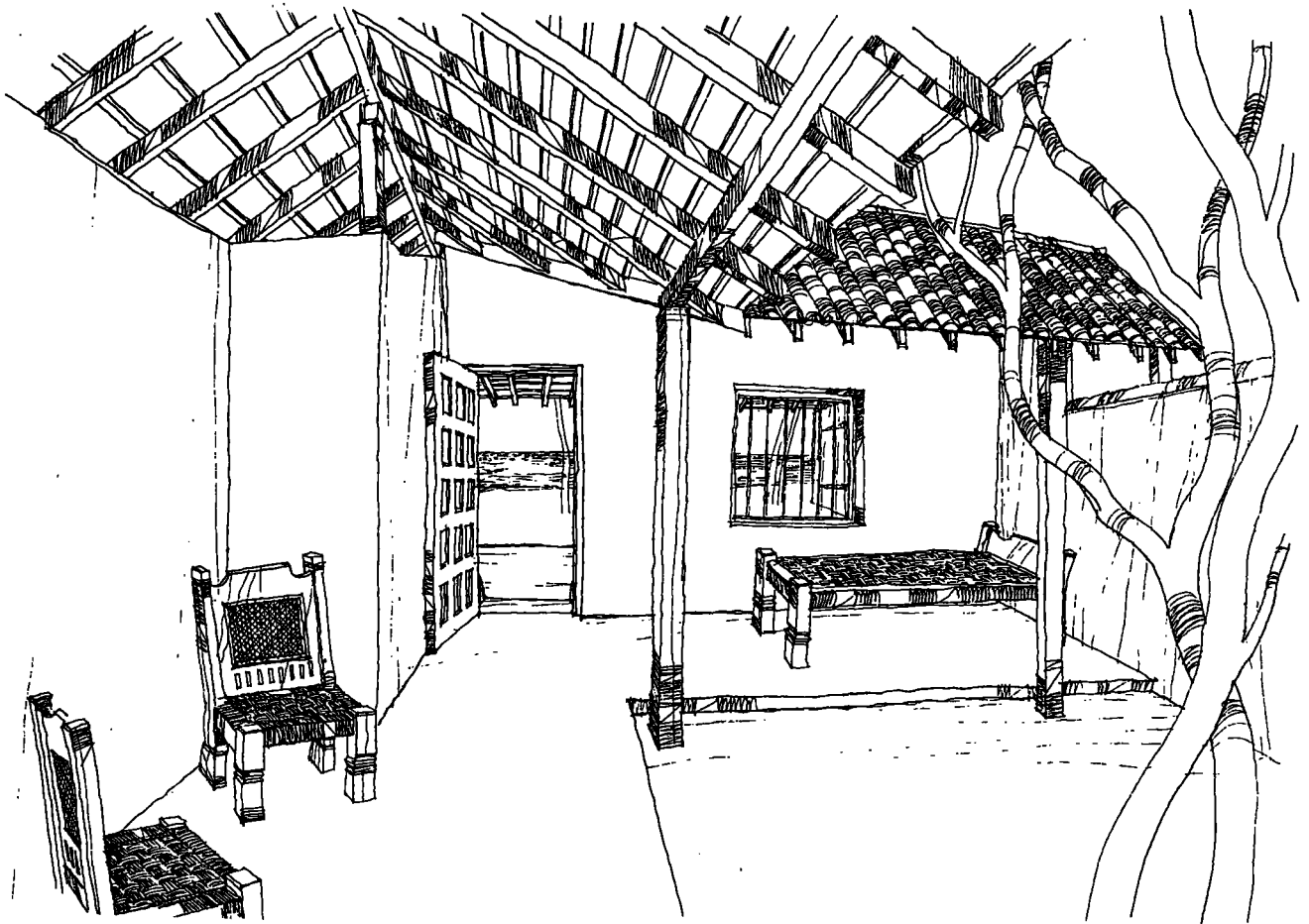


Plate 5: Veranda & courtyard of the individual unit 'House' in the proposed Southern Village Hotel.

Southern Village Hotel in Balapitiya. This is to function as an Ayurvedic Resort and includes an Ayurvedic Treatment Centre as well as a Yoga & Meditation Centre. The initial concept for the hotel has been the Devala Villages of Sri Lanka, which consisted of houses and places of trade arranged in loose geometry around a Devala, which was the focal point of the village, and was regularly visited by multitudes from even faraway places. How appropriate it is, he points out, considering the fact that Ayurveda itself has the same roots in the adjoining sub continent as much as the Devalas (though the Devala itself is a combination of Temple & Kovil unique to Sri Lanka), and that Ayurveda used to be practised in combination with religious rites.

The public areas are designed to have an external appearance of large airy shed like structures with high plinth. Even these come up to a maximum of only two storeys, and are to be

constructed with traditional material where practical.

The rooms are either individual 'houses' or parts of a four-room two-story unit. The 'house' is a spacious room with a large private courtyard with inner and outer verandas. All the structures contain the high plinth and particular form to suggest to some extent a mediaeval tradition. The basic facilities nevertheless consist of all that can be expected in a four star hotel.

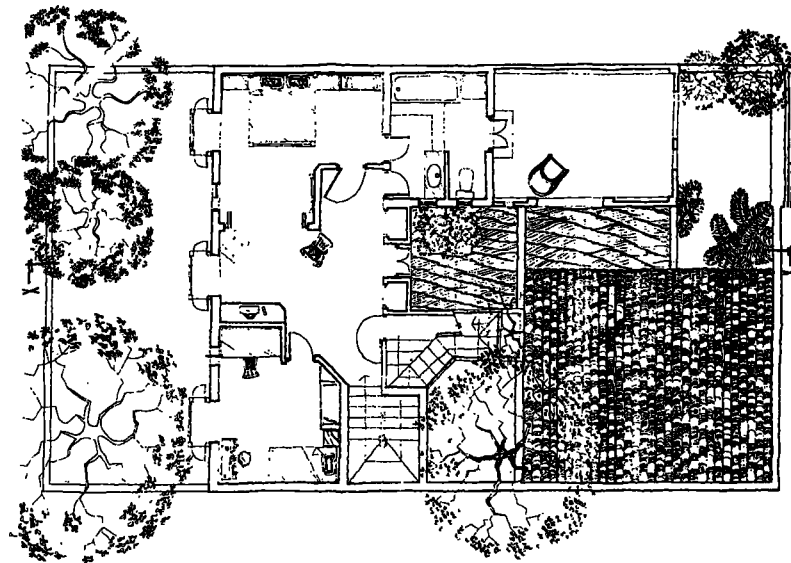
Moving on to the ever-important Domestic Scale, Vinod produces one of his favourite quotes from 'Architecture in the Age of Scepticism – Denys Ladson':

"In designing we like to think of: Entering the building, entering the street entering the building, entering Nature. A building in the landscape, the landscape in the building. A building in the street, a street in the building.

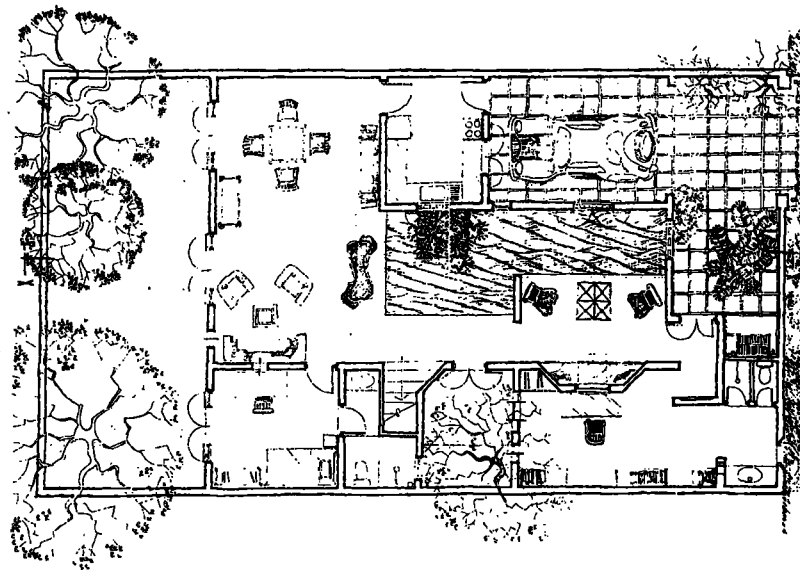
To us, buildings are not only objects, but part of continuum, real or imaginary or both. By their very nature, they are a microcosm of the city."

The example of his own house, located in Nawala, is a relatively early design of his, and reflects spatial quality rather similar to that of Tropical Villas. The ground floor consists of a free flowing living area punctuated with the presence of an office room, a guest room and pantry. The upper floor consists mainly of the master bedroom and one other. The master bedroom opens out to include a TV lobby carrying the free flowing character further on. The entire roof area of the upper floor is flat concrete to allow for a roof terrace, while the flat roof over the garage becomes a secluded terrace to be reached through the upper floor bathroom.

The striking effect of the house is its being a composition of simple lines,



Upper Flow Plan



Ground Flow Plan

and the spacious air it manages to create despite its tight urban setting.

A newer example of a house (recently completed) by Vinod would be the T. N. De Silva house in Nedimala. It

would be appropriate to bring up another one of his favourite quotes or rather guidelines at this point, which goes: "... spaces are related not by their proximity being next to each other, but by being within each other.

The small 'my' space is a part of the large 'our' space ..."

The spaces that constitute the house are designed to become one and felt as a whole, he explains, in such a way



SECTION XX

Plate 6: Plans, Sections, and Elevations of the Architect's own house, illustrate the free flow of space in the tight setting.



Plate 7: The Staircase

that an adjoining space is 'felt' as the current one is experienced. It carefully avoids discretion of the spaces by means such as a tree that is located in the ground floor level and blossoms with a spread of branches (and flowers) at the upper level. The same effect is added to by numerous windows and small openings within the house connecting the spaces in a manner so subtle as not to sacrifice the seclusion of the private places.

The continuity of the internal spaces with the landscape, which is a foremost of the Architect's goals, is best experienced from the ground floor interior looking out. The walls of the living and dining rooms facing the rear garden melt into large voids with only iron grills (partially operable) for separation. The grills themselves are designed for aesthetic character, although their presence is mainly for the purpose of security, and are painted a matt black to fade in making

way for the greater purpose of the void. In combination with this, a subtle questioning of the idea of 'inside' and 'outside' has been done by painting the dining area (walls and ceiling) in a textured purple, and connecting it to the living with a large decorative window which is reflected on the opposite wall of the dining connecting it to the garden.

The few projects discussed here, and those still on the drawing boards are but the beginning of Archt. Vinod Jayasinghe's career, as he believes one never completes learning. A fitting concluding remark would be his view on Architecture in general, which he sees as frozen moments of music. The rhythm, stillness, shrillness and noise expressed in solids, voids and intermediates in a universal language as powerful as music, containing at times perhaps the subtlety of a Chopin Etude or the deep passion of a Raga, or the multitude of struggling emotions in Mahler's Symphony for a Thousand.

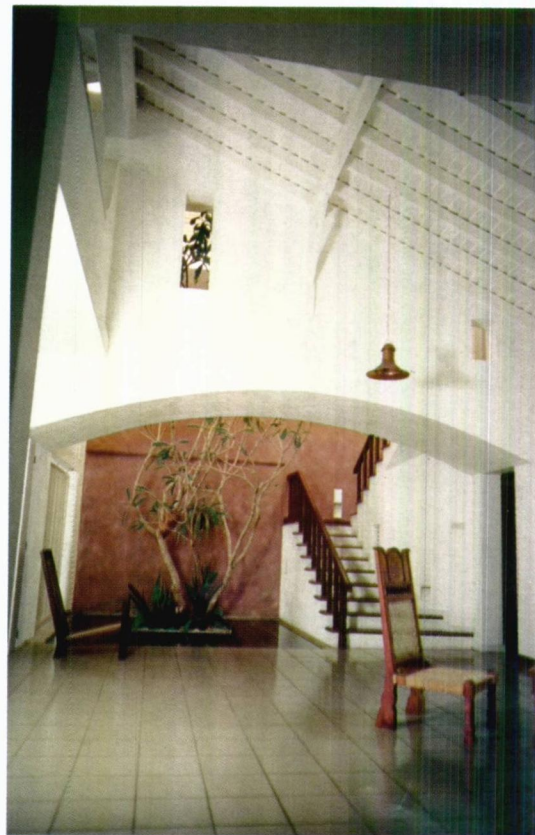


Plate 8: The 'floating' tree in the pond invites one up the stairs, spreading its branches at the upper level. (T.N. De Silva House).