

P R A C T I C E P R O F I L E

It is only rarely that the students of architecture who arrive in the urban pasture lands to learn architecture return to their native lands to practise. Usually, they tend to get used to grazing the seductive urbanity abundant in the city and find it unimaginable that they could make home anymore where it once was. In the Sri Lankan context, Manjula Witharama is the notable exception. Having obtained his architecture qualifications in early 1990s from the University of Moratuwa and having passed through the various mills of prestigious practices in Colombo, Manjula returned to domicile in Kurunegala in 1994 on the invitation of few of his well-wishers, family and friends; an atypical route indeed. It is not unusual for such educated

men and women who return home to be frustrated no sooner they arrive. As he set foot in this unexplored practice-landscape, he realised that the earth beneath him smelled very differently from the city where he learned the practice of architecture. However, Manjula was not unlucky to suffer the fate many others who would have ventured into such undefined territories and would have thereafter succumbed to the inevitable frustrations.

There had in fact been another young architect who had beaten the bush before Manjula and therefore was dwelling in this landscape before him. Kamal Ranaweera perhaps was one of the first who had succeeded in returning home and in

establishing him self as an architect in the region. He ran a good practice in Kurunegala and had made his presence felt in his community in the way new buildings made the distinctions. Manjula had close friends whose encouraging words and persuasive support made him stay at Kurunegala and begin a practice. Commissions for houses were easy to find and the opportunities to explore his convictions were ample. Interestingly enough the usually mortifying financial prosperity was almost absent. The friends were actively seeking work for Manjula in the earnest hope that they could keep him there and enjoy his sincere companionship. Before long, Manjula Witharama, the young architect in

An Atypical Trail of An Architect: Manjula Witharama and the Other Half

Dr. Ranjith Dayaratne



Kurunegala was awarded his first government project, "Sakura Model Kindergarten School and Teacher Training Institute at Welangollawatte, Kurunegala" Manjula was rooted comfortably in this unchartered territory where not many architects would dare to dwell alone. An architect traversing this predominantly rural landscape has to unlearn his masters and has to learn the art of practice from the village market. The clients arriving at his doorstep carried no conceptions of architecture, and had hardly any perception of the 'other world' where the architects' imaginations seek solace. The architect and the client do not even share the same language and same mannerism. Patience is demanded in excess when professionalising a work that is otherwise considered 'ordinary' and anybody's business. Architecture is not seen as a service, and there is no practice of paying for services but tangible goods. Some would want very little like 'just a plan' or some others who have become connoisseurs in outsmarting the architects would demand the undeliverable. Clients will want a major stake in the design process as much as in the construction process. Educating the client comes before the commission to the extent that the practice has to become a kind of ad-hoc teaching institute almost all the time. This was indeed the "Other Half" of the world where the architects are an unborn species.

Despite the odds that seem to sully the purified professional mannerism, Manjula had learned in the school, the opportunities that seem to be present in this new landscape ignited his desire to discover and to succeed. On the one hand there were the co-operate clients and the Government clients and on the other, the well-to-do individuals and the middle and lower middle class clients. Since the latter dominated and invaded Manjula's practice most often, it was not possible to ignore their presence.

The contributions they made to the survival of the practice was however almost negligible.

The lower middle class category of clients find the romantic traditionalism that most architects tend to offer to such people irrelevant even if experimental projects can offer logical and cost effective solutions. Their aspirations are strongly focused upon the basic shelter, which can meet the rudimentary needs of day-to-day living. However, there is an underlying desire to seek better shelter than what they or their parents possess, the better being defined largely in terms of the materials used. Manjula learnt these lessons quickly and was willing to modify his approach to fall in line with the realities of the ground.

The modern day insatiable desire to acquire as many material possessions as possible had gripped the community that he was placed in from top to bottom. Building had become the main means of reflecting the social status and people at all levels had this underlying desire driving the forces to build and build in many forms. The architect was called upon to give expression to such desires, clients of each social stratum demanding popular imageries of their choice be reproduced through design. Among the lowest stratum of the community, there was also the strong desire to climb the social ladder by the use of the forms and spaces they aspired to construct.

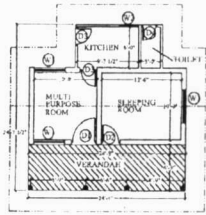
The middle class clients preferred to reflect a slightly different attitude and an interpretation of aesthetics of the houses by means of the size of the rooms, position of the toilets, use of verandahs, and the introduction of smaller pantries and so on. The cost had to be minimum, but the position in the society needed to be reiterated. Signifying elements such as car porches, colonnaded arches etc. constituted the major components that reflected their de-

sire for upward mobility. This suggests that people of all walks of life show a greater degree of similarity in their desires and attitudes although people at different social levels require different elements and forms in order to achieve similar objectives. The ends are the same and the needs are the same. It is the difference in affordability that dictates the nature of the form. Despite conflicting and sometimes incomprehensible needs, aspirations and means, Manjula Witharama's practice never turned down requests of clients from either the middle class or the lower middle class. However, as the work-load increased, with only a marginal increase in the income from such work, Manjula Witharama had to find means of dealing with such clients whose pay cheques did not necessarily correspond with the work that was involved.

One of the popular and widely used practices indeed is the employment of type plans in most such situations. If time and expertise that is necessary to create every dwelling design anew cannot be afforded, type-plans can perhaps offer the opportunity to negotiate the designs to the nearest acceptability and appropriateness within the shortest period of time. The architect makes the client understand the full implications of the plan, so selected and changes requested are incorporated. Finally designs are refined to reach those matching the client's likes and dislikes. This method is adopted to cut down the cost of time spent on design development and other stages to minimise the cost burden on the client. Indeed a house bank of typeplans has been created over time in order to facilitate the ever-increasing demand for this category of houses. Manjula is now taking measures to increase his house bank from 120 up to 500 type plans. There, people of low-income band will have more choices and less hassle in dealing with the architect. Apart from the routine work, and when the time permits, Manjula devotes his time to devise more



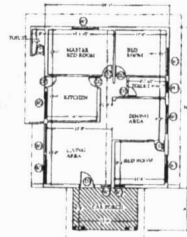
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



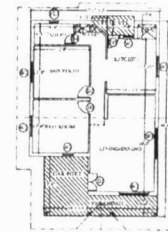
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



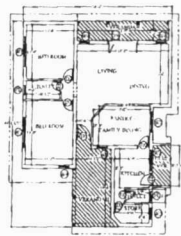
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



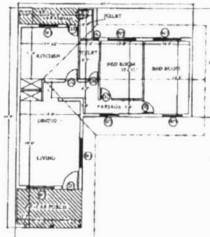
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



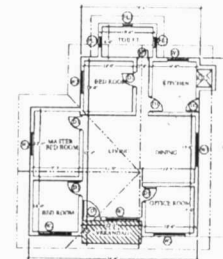
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



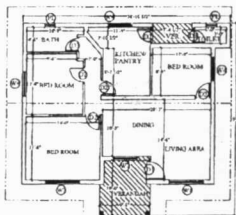
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



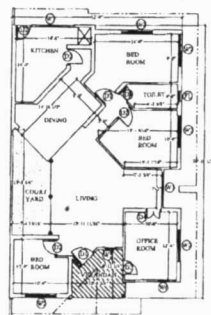
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



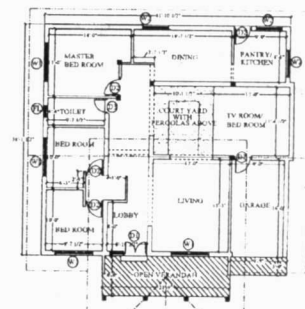
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



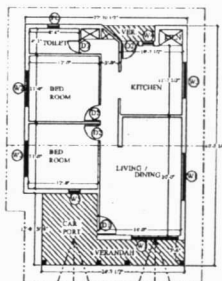
FRONT ELEVATION



LAYOUT PLAN



FRONT ELEVATION



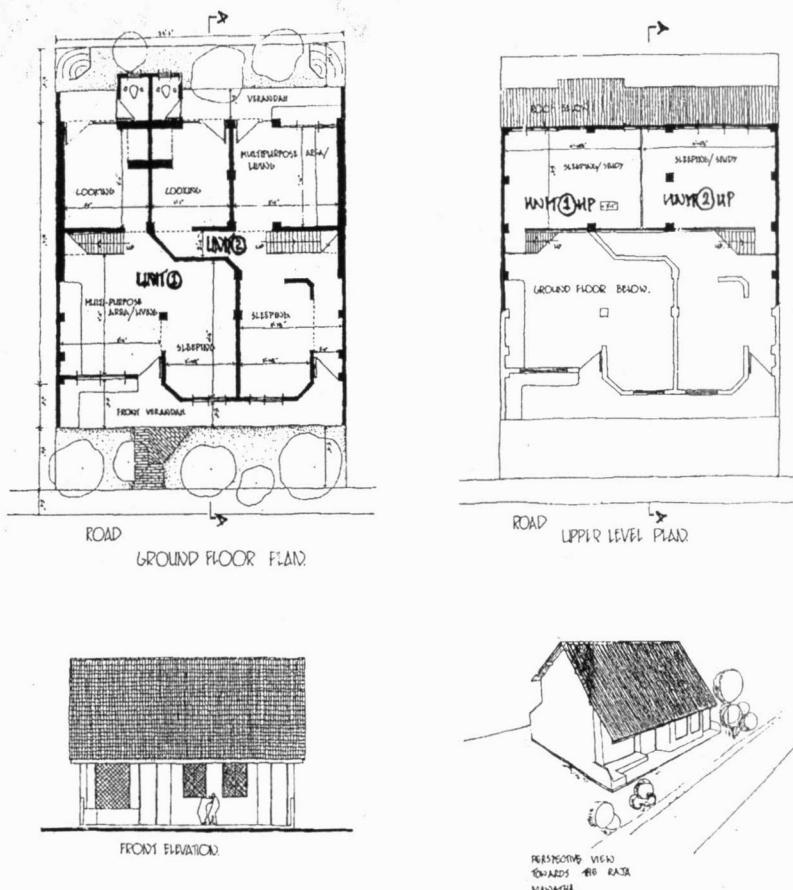
LAYOUT PLAN

From the 'house-bank' - the Type Plans

and more imaginative and acceptable solutions for low cost housing for the public at large. His aspiration is to produce a more systematic and organised set of such designs in a manner that is accessible to the public at large in the near future. Surely, the poorer and the disadvantaged are blessed to have someone like Manjula working in silence to offer a kind of architectural service that the majority of this country could find surprisingly available.

This orientation of Manjula to embark on working at the community needs of the poorer, disadvantaged and left-out-by-the-architects indeed has roots in his university training. Manjula won the first place in a competition held among his peers in the university as far back as 1987 for a project to design a low cost house. It is not an exaggeration to claim that it was perhaps the first actual project undertaken by the faculty of architecture of the University of Moratuwa employing a students' competition. This was when Manjula was studying in the fifth year, and the charismatic 'Guru' in Architecture Vidura Sri Nammuni was at his best. Students were challenged to produce socially relevant architecture those days and Vidura was into community service. The low cost house designed by Manjula for an actual family was adjudged the best among the peers and the project was implemented by the "Interact Club District 322". It was not a coincidence that the president of the Rotary club that initiated this project at that time was in fact the professor of architecture, Prof. Lakshman Alwis. The family members themselves had participated in the selection process and Manjula perhaps had the first taste of 'community oriented architecture' that ignited his orientation to take the route he took. The house was constructed and still exists at No. 27, Raja Mawatha, Nugegoda although now heavily modified. This design stemmed from a careful analysis of the socio-cultural and psychological needs of

Low cost house - the winning entry, 1987



the family and the actual costs of construction played a vital role in both design and final selection.

Manjula however should not be now labelled as 'a designer-of-the poor' or 'a low-cost architect'. His architectural practice also explores and spans across the full spectrum of projects most other architects have confined to. In the case of Manjula however, the spectrum has widened to take on board the lowest stratum of the community who in most architects' offices will find no reception. In fact, it is not just that he has taken them on board, but has deliberately and consciously nurtured as an essential aspect of his practice.

Among the many projects Manjula is experimenting with the same vigour as he has done with the low-cost and the poor are supermarkets,

office buildings, interiors, hotels and hospital buildings. In fact, Manjula dwells there as comfortably as among the poor and less-paying clients.

The Model Kindergarten School and Teacher Training Institute at Welangollawatte, Kurunegala

This first government project undertaken by Manjula Witharama's office now is in its fifth phase of construction. Funded by the North Western Provincial Council in collaboration with the Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JAICA) of Japan, this project has been running for a period of 06 years. In sharp contrast to the low-cost dwellings developed by means of type plans, Manjula is confronted in this project with the task of designing a place for children whose visual and spatial

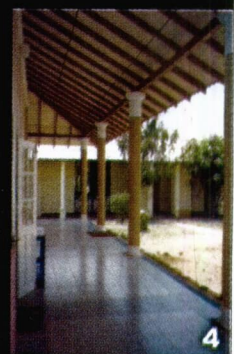
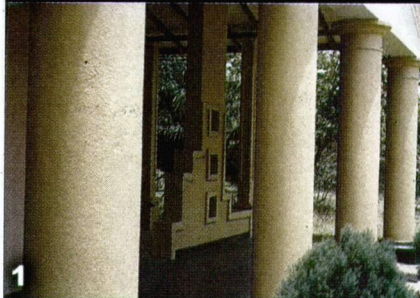
conceptualisations are different from those of the adults. A place for children to become what they are, the project recognises that the children's world is one of colourfulness, free and spontaneous movements and a delightful and friendly childishness.

Translating these into built-form Manjula makes a very convincing attempt to detach and then bring coherence to the form constituted primarily of coloured elements. He employs the somewhat rigid corridor system to construct the linkages and bring the order while allowing the activity spaces to spread out freely and be together at the same time. Children can discover a myriad of meanings, in the nooks and corners of the spaces he creates. It allows a great degree of interaction and opportunity to experience all such spaces where freedom of movement is omnipresent. Crafted with inviting corners, the composition makes the place more appealing to the children.

Sesons Hotel, Tank Circular Road, Kurunegala.

This hotel designed for an individual who runs several similar businesses in the province offered Manjula the challenge of transforming an otherwise lukewarm atmosphere of the hotel to a luxurious one within an extremely tight budget. Manjula looked for his clues from his surrounding and infused the sense of domesticity couched in the languages popularly employed in the Historical "Walawwa" buildings so prevalent in the region. The buildings were close to the people in terms of familiarity but expressed a great sense of esteem to the building and those who wanted to use it. Still partially completed but opened to the public, this building can be termed as an experimentation on compounding the common extremities in architecture; to be sumptuous but without being hostile to the rural and the average. The client sought to persuade the upper middle class and co-operate clients seeking greener pastures away from Kurunegala for

The Model Kindergarten School and Teacher Training Institute at Welangollawatte, Kurunegala.

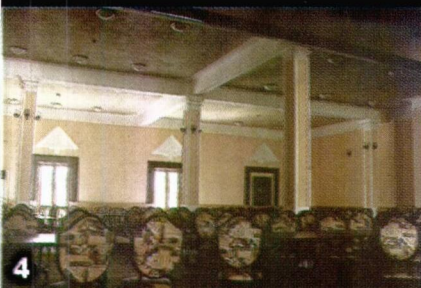


1. The front colonnade
2. A wall paintings of the 'blue' classroom
3. An interior view of the 'pink' classroom
4. The verandah with colonnade – 'pink' class room
5. Colourful playing equipments

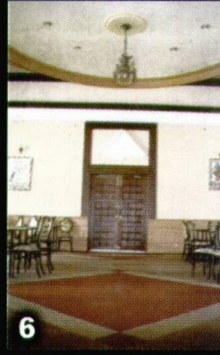
their functions, seminars, dismayed by the absence of a well-appointed place in the region. Despite tremendous efforts Manjula put into resolve the conflicting demands within the budgets available, lack of funding had continued to erode the opportunities available in realising the architectural schemata. The homely appearance of the building and its scaled representation of "Walawwa" are encouraging. The Double height entry brings a sense of importance

to the place while the single height columns at the inner entry makes shifts this immediately to a homely atmosphere. The materials had to be cost-effective but generate a sense of life that can enliven people of all layers of society. Clearly Manjula has achieved what was desired that it has become a popular venue for all major functions of the province. The cost has been a bare 970 Rupees a Sq. feet, a cost that not even a house is built for these days!

Sesons Hotel, Tank Circular Road, Kurunegala



1. Front view
2. Banquet Hall – interior
3. Corridors
4. Banquet Hall – interior
5. Details - entrance lobby
6. Banquet Hall - interior
7. Murals on gateposts
8. Decorative corridor/ Interior



Globe Towers at Sri Vajiragnana Mawatha, Colombo 10

Colombo as a metropolitan city attracts a large community of middleclass migrant workers and the businessmen who need to stay in Colombo. The client wanted to build on every inch of the land as allowed within the regulations and the rifts erupted between the architect's conceptions and the client's conceptions of what to build and how to build. While the client was hell-bent on making as much profit as possible no matter the quality of the building or the environment, Manjula was adamant that he will not give up his values and the values that he is duty-bound to safeguard for the society.

In any case, Manjula was not prepared to make an 'Urban Slum' the client wanted. For almost three years, the battle went on until a compromise could be struck between the ideals of the two. Space had to be constrained but without creating the sense of an urban slum.

As basics, the lengths of corridor spaces were minimised while offering wide passage to rooms that was naturally ventilated at all the times. Privacy of the occupants was achieved by avoiding the situation of windows facing each other unit in two different. Front motifs and colours were used to cut down the heights. The building comprised of 132 apartment units with two bed room-types and designed bed-sitters. Perhaps this is the first time bed-sitters were introduced in the Colombo market and the essence of middle class accommodation requirements were met in the shape of spaces for compacted urban living.