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A single minded devotion to the needs of her client and a desire for her client to be happy is something that matters to Suzette Whehella.

The client is the center of her work and the only person who matters to her, where her profession is concerned. Every project is a gem to Whehella because she gives it 100%. It might be a low budget project, but it is still something that she will do to the best of her ability. Daily News features this well-grounded Architect in Arch-talk this week.

A very big role

"I somehow practise my architecture in a way that I try to treat every project and client specially. Because of the passion I have towards it, I try to do every project in an innovative fashion, something different, which will give a certain individuality to that client. You meet them and talk to them, and somehow I try to discern a certain character. Sometimes when you talk to them you can understand what they need. I can gauge what kind of a character I am looking at."

If it is a personalized house for example, when you talk to them, and have a particular relationship with them, you understand what type of need they will require in the house. So I try to work very closely, and get into a certain relationship with them. And in the end what happens is, the character of that client gets into the design. So I focus on that, and try to be not too selfish about it, because when you get a project there is a tendency for you to gratify yourself with your design. I try to listen to my client and try to satisfy him, then gratify myself. That is how the character of the client becomes the project. And that is actually very enjoyable, because they begin to trust you and there is a relationship. There is a give and take. Then there is this journey, which is the most important part of the project, to see a happy face when the project is completed, is everything. It is very fulfilling," said Whehella.

Taking the kiddies to work is something that happens a

some novel projects around about in 2010, these particular clients came to me. It was basically an interior, and they wanted a retail shop done. So they wanted to popularize their name because they were always known as retail people who were selling to someone else. So what they wanted was something novel to go out with a bang! They gave me some vague ideas, so we came up with this novel idea and the shop was called 'Gennelle shoes', and we did their first shop in Duplication Road. It was kind of a

architecture. What I have learnt from them is, be practical and do simple designs so that everything falls into place and the structure is easy. And you need to tap that creativity in you. When I started architecture, after I qualified, there was a certain position, I wanted to explore and do creative things. If you think of architecture as a profession which is a service, then it is easy to tackle it. So what I teach my students is - 'Do it with passion. The moment you stop enjoying it that is not architecture for me,' said Whehella.

Difficult and enjoyable

When we all start off it is difficult and enjoyable. The difficulty comes with the territory. When you are young and inexperienced there is always that added challenge. But soon you become the king of the mountain.

"It was a tough course at the beginning, because it was a work and study. So you work for about four days a week, and then you go to the institute to study. At that time it was under the Sri Lankan Institute of Architects, and now it is called the City School of Architecture. Those days we had classes every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and the other four days we had to go to offices and work as apprentices, so it was really tough to have time for ourselves. There were certain sacrifices you had to make, and family got neglected. It takes about eight years to qualify with your charter. It depends on how creative you are and how talented you are. That counts a lot. At the beginning there will be a bit of work hanging around, and through your friends works starts to come in. But after you qualify, in another 10 years if you work hard, you can be known. I got my charter in 2007 and now it is 2014, so it has been a long journey. You have to be patient as well. And also your design skills and the architecture that you practice, counts a lot," explained Whehella.

Composure is an enviable quality is it not? Composure and poise are qualities that come with time. Staying calm and holding things together is essential for an architect.

"When the deadline comes on, I try to be calm as possible and I teach my assistants to be calm as possible. And somehow we try to handle that through. There are difficult positions where the pressure is high, and you get tough clients, and when you become an architect you are given the role of being the arbitrator as well. You are always in the middle. At that time you have to get in mind that you need to be calm in any situation. An architect can mend a project or break a project. I believe an architect can hold a project together. In a high pressure situation, if you lose your cool, the project will go down. It is better to be calm and sort of steer it in a sort of reasonable way," she added.

The future of Sri Lanka is secure. Things are moving in the correct direction. And our local architects are more than competent.

"We have over 1000 architects in our country and it is a lot of talent. It is not just a bunch of architects. There are a lot of talented people in Sri Lanka. I would admire Sri Lankan architects more than foreign architects. These are wonderful people who do really good architecture in this country. There is a very strong sense of understanding of design in Sri Lanka right now. Parks are being created and the renovations and restorations are being done very tastefully and carefully. The authorities see the importance of preserving trees and having green spaces for people."

When structures get personality!



lot. It isn't uncommon for parents to take their kids to the office. And for most professionals, these initial interactions created when they were young, gave them an impression of the world and how it works. In fact this socializing formed their character and to a lesser or greater extent, their psyche. "One of my most important inspirations was my father. It started at a very young age, when I was about six years old, and my father was an engineer. Most of my time was spent with him, where I used to hang around in his office and go on sites, and I used to meet architects. And maybe my father encouraged me to do that. And it suddenly became one of my dreams also, and I focused on doing my studies and going towards that. My father played a very big role," she added.

Hard to believe

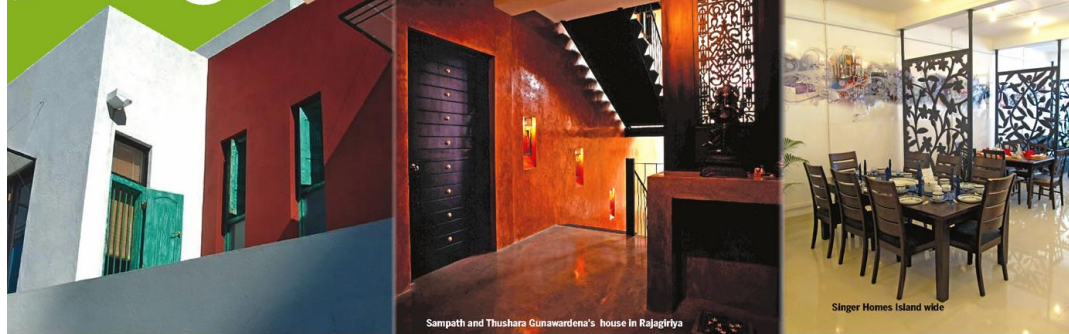
I suppose like all architects Whehella started small and then built up on that. Through it all she faithfully followed her conviction that an architect should give 100% to every project. "I've done

big area which was 2000 square feet, and I tried to open all the windows and show people on the road what it was all about. They had a logo of an oval so I took that into consideration and did this retail interior for them."

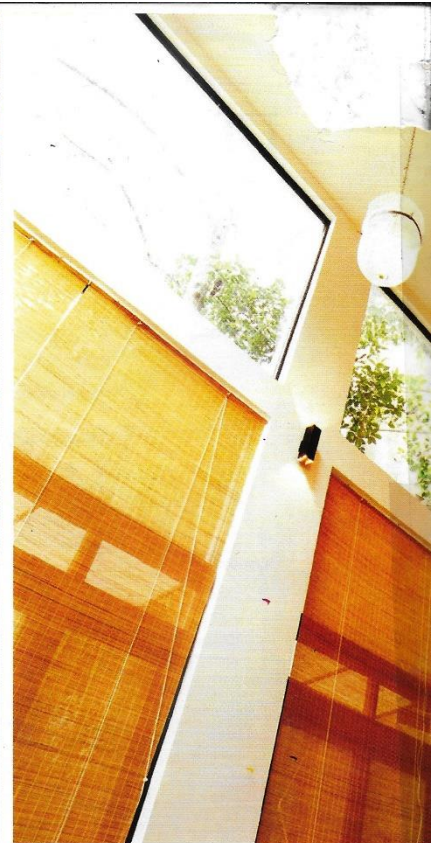
When I first started my practice, I did a lot of personalized housing and then it increased. Eventually I got into a little bit of interiors. Where I studied it was a work and study course and all through the seven years we followed that course - we used to work and study. We used to change over a couple of offices, in all seven years I changed over about three offices in that period. So that is how I got into interiors, because there were certain projects I was involved in. I do retail, interiors, corporate interiors and multi storey buildings. Then I started doing a little bit of boutique hotels. Other than that, there were other things I took part in, such as helping people to do their exhibitions," said Whehella.

If you don't enjoy your job you need to do some rethinking. Whehella finds it hard to believe that you can do something like architecture, if your heart isn't in it.

"I think there were many mentors in my long years of



Attachment : Featured Magazine Articles – Fusion – Daily News (April 29, 2014)
(Source: Fusion – Daily News - April 29, 2014)



Her career as an architect began in 1997 and over the years, she had become a versatile creator in the profession. Today she is a much sought after architect having completed a number of housing and office complexes.

The inspiration to be involved in Civil Engineering arena had come when her father, a civil engineer himself, took his little daughter along on some of his visits to the sites. When she expressed her willingness to be a civil engineer, her father had directed her towards architecture. Despite attempts by some of her teachers, who saw the abundance of musical talent in her, to persuade her to become an accomplished musician, she had opted to choose architecture as her profession.

In this month's issue of Real Estate Partner magazine, Zuzette Whehella, a product of St. Bridget's Convent Colombo, describes one of her pet projects completed in Medawelikada, Rajagiriya for a top executive in a leading IT firm in Colombo.

"The joy you feel knows no bounds when your client is completely satisfied with what you have created, especially when it is a house where they are going to live with their loved ones," says Zuzette in her cozy office down Longdon Place.

The ambience is just right for a committed architect, with high-tech gadgetry and green environs beyond, providing the inspiration from nature to come up with classic creations themed 'Sustainable Tranquility'.

"The house built on ten perches of land in Medawelikada, Rajagiriya is very close to the Diyawannawa Canal. The design was to accentuate open spaces and also to blend as much greenery as possible in that small area. The historic Diyawannawa is visible from most areas of the house and I myself distinctly felt the delightful features of volume and space emanating from the house," says Zuzette.

Her client had been overawed by her achievement and had been grateful for the masterpiece created for himself and his family. Being a busy executive and handling a stressful workload almost every day, he had immediately felt the tranquil atmosphere that greeted him as he entered his abode. The spaces, colours and the placement of items of religious importance, for he is a devout follower of his faith, had all blended to form a very pleasant dwelling to return from a very hectic day.

"Not only my client and his family with two children, but also the guests who came for the house warming ceremony felt the

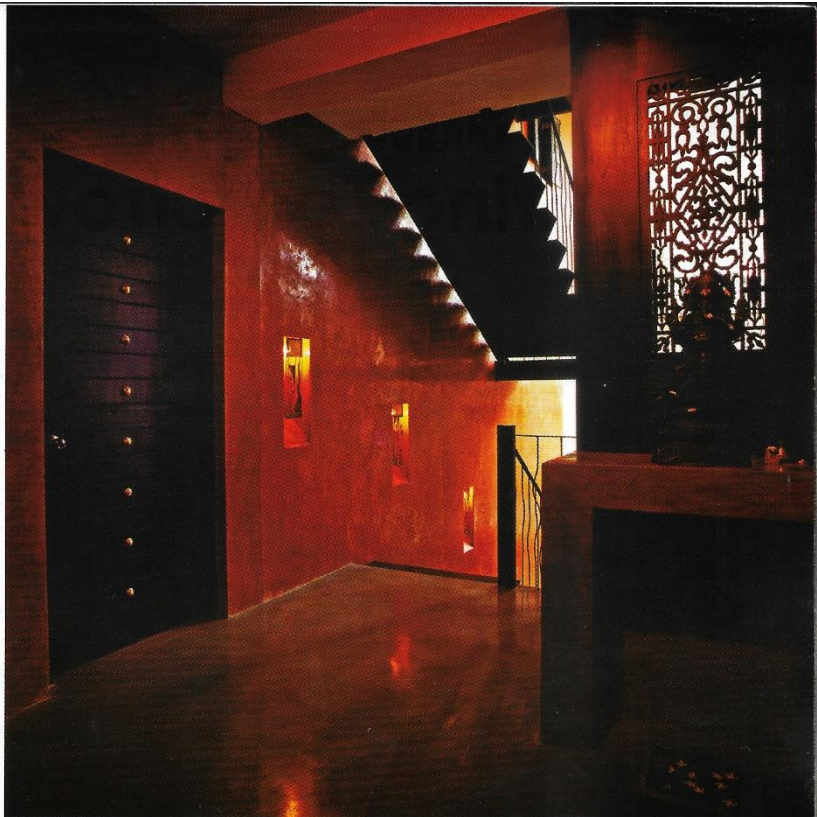
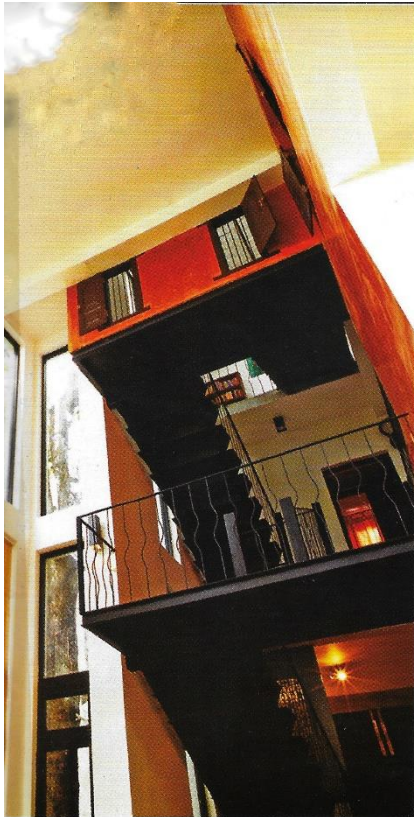
unique, tranquil ambience of the domain and commented on it," says Zuzette, beaming.

The three-story dwelling of 3,200 sq. ft. has a guest room, two rooms for the children and a master bedroom. Zuzette made use of all her expertise and state of the art technology in designing the house. During the initial discussions with the client, she had got all information to come up with solutions to meet all his preferences.

"It was so easy to work with him as we worked almost on the same wavelength. He readily agreed with my suggestions and whatever he wanted in place, it was to my liking too. He wanted certain religious statues very prominently displayed and on my own I got an expert to design some unique statuettes. The creation beautifully brought together the right ambience my client wanted," said Zuzette.

The double height walls in the living and dining areas certainly added volume and space to the whole dwelling and her amazed constructor had commented that it was the first time that he had to build such high walls with the particular colour and finish.

The living room is a delight indeed. French windows that open to the garden on two



sides, minimum furniture and natural daylight cascading on to the whole area gives the living area and aura of added volume and space, again blending well with Zuzette's concept of 'Sustainable Tranquillity'. The walls are orange and green polished cement requiring minimum or almost nil maintenance.

On a split-level is the dining area big enough to accommodate an eight-seater dining table of ample proportions. The solid wood furniture contrasting coolly with the cut and polish cement floor glistening with a yellow green hue. The two extra high tats could be rolled up for extra lighting.

As you climb the solid wood stairway there are two recesses on the right side wall and as you step on to the first floor, there's another. All lighted with figurines done by a person especially selected by Zuzette. The railing on the stairway is all steel.

On the landing to the first floor is the area of special religious importance to the dweller where a statue is placed very prominently. The soft lighting and the decorated wooden grill on the left compliment the serene ambience.

Part of the second floor, which could be described as a roof terrace, is covered

with sheet glass type covering supported by wooden beams, again minimizing the dependence on electric lighting. Enough natural light comes in throughout the day to keep alive most of the living areas with bright sunshine.

The colours used are soothing and pleasing to the eye, again complementing the overall theme. "The use of colours is taking different dimensions nowadays and today architects are suggesting colour schemes, which, some time back, would have been described as 'atrocious,'" added Zuzette. The pictures amply demonstrate Zuzette's use of colour in the right places in ideal combinations.

The airy spaces require minimum, or almost nil use of electricity for lighting during daytime. As you move up, the Diyawanawa Oya come more into view, creating an aura of living close to nature.

All floors in the living areas are cut and polished cement that require minimum maintenance. It glows with a fusion of yellow and green adding to the overall ambience of this unique mansion.

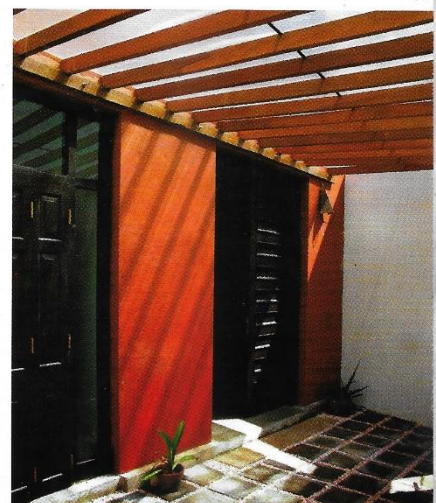
Zuzette has left ample garden space with at least one tree reaching to the second floor on all sides.

There are a number of items, especially

of wood, that have been purchased from used item dealers. "That not only kept the costs low but also added to the overall theme, "Sustainable Tranquillity" without compromising on quality standards," said Zuzette.

At present, amongst other projects, Zuzette is concentrating on two low cost housing projects, which she described as 'revolutionary' in the civil engineering arena.

By Tony Jayasuriya



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