

The Style Icon of Contemporary Sri Lanka

Posted on

Udayshanth Fernando stands as a Sri Lankan paragon of creativity. Thirty-eight years ago, he founded Paradise Road, redefining and setting a new standard in interior design – one that many have sought to emulate, yet only this lifestyle connoisseur truly masters, with his innate ability to create pieces and spaces of timeless taste.

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Photography Rohan Herath.



Shanth Fernando: The creative force behind Paradise Road's timeless aesthetic.

On a beautiful day in Paris, while travelling through its charming streets on a business trip, Udayshanth Fernando found himself captivated by the city's elegance – the rhythm of its boulevards, the grandeur of its landmarks, and the poetry in its everyday life. The artist within him absorbed every sight and sound, quietly seeking inspiration to fuel his creative spirit. Then, as fate would have it, he passed a street sign that read “Rue de Paradis”, instinctively translating it to “Paradise Road”. He paused and thought, “Now that would be a perfect name for a shop in Sri Lanka.”

There he was, gazing out each day for six long months before his first customer finally walked through the door. In 1987, Udayshanth Fernando opened the very first Paradise Road store on Flower Road. At that time, his vision—focused on simplicity, clean lines, and a monochrome palette accented by the occasional burst of color—was strikingly unfamiliar to many. Yet, it was precisely this refined

minimalism that soon captivated hearts and redefined taste. Now, decades later, he reflects on his remarkable journey, his business philosophy, his distinctive design approach, and the story behind the enduring success of Paradise Road.

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A curated haven of Sri Lankan design — Paradise Road’s signature blend of art, culture, and craftsmanship.



Where heritage objects and contemporary design meet: Paradise Road’s iconic aesthetic.

Design Landscape in Sri Lanka and its Transformation

Well-known as Shanth Fernando, this creative visionary broke away from an aesthetic tradition that had long defined Sri Lankan design since the 1960s. He describes that era as “very colonial Sri Lankan”, shaped by luminaries such as Geoffrey Bawa, Ena de Silva, and Laki Senanayake.

Determined to redefine that familiar narrative, Shanth set out to rewrite the design landscape—becoming both an innovator and a disruptor. With an instinctive flair for transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, he introduced a refined sensibility that brought sophistication and restraint to interior art and craft. He proudly calls his creation a “new design language for Sri Lanka,” marked by discipline, clean lines, and regimented stripes and monochrome.

Fernando’s passion for everything creative first took shape in Australia through his venture, Art of Play. One could say that this first store served as the precursor to the expansive design empire that he would later build and elevate in Sri Lanka. During this time, he drew inspiration from Australian design houses such as Country

Road, as well as the London designer Terence Conran. Drawing from his experience as a wholesaler in Australia, importing Sri Lankan merchandise, Shanth distilled global influences into a uniquely Sri Lankan modern elegance.

Fernando fondly describes his first shop on Flower Road as ‘minimal, stylish, crowded with things, yet very warm.’ It was an intimate space that felt curated and personal—every corner invited discovery. He transformed shop fittings into pieces for homes, subtly redefining how people thought about interiors. One bold idea was dedicating an entire section to white porcelain, beautifully juxtaposed with antiques—a harmony of simplicity and history that became his signature.

The shop soon drew admiration for its distinctive aesthetic. Among its early admirers were design luminaries like Geoffrey Bawa, as well as international tastemakers. Even Habitat in London took notice—its chairman went so far as to write to the Financial Times, UK recommending Paradise Road to travelers visiting Sri Lanka. Yet, when offered the chance to become Habitat’s agent, Fernando politely declined; he was never interested in commercialism for its own sake. His vision was not about business—it was about beauty, integrity, and creating spaces that spoke from the soul.



Paradise Road The Gallery Café—monochrome charm meets art, design, and good food.

Personal Background and Return to Sri Lanka

In 1987, at the height of Sri Lanka’s internal unrest, Udayshanth Fernando returned home with his family—a decision that marked the start of his extraordinary entrepreneurial journey. He never looked back, steadily building a brand defined by elegance, refinement, and artistic sensibility. Each venture reflected his discerning eye, adding depth and distinction to a portfolio shaping the island’s design landscape.

What once drove him from Sri Lanka was a sense of disappointment. Born into a wealthy family, Fernando’s early years were marked by privilege and profound loss—his mother passed away when he was 15, his father four years later. The two, he says, shaped him in different ways: his father gave him foundation, his mother

gave him direction.

His mother, ever the nurturer, recognized his innate artistic flair early on. She took his paintings to the renowned George Keyt, who advised her to provide him with art materials but not formal art schooling—believing true creativity should remain untainted by imitation. His father, by contrast, was a shrewd businessman who had built considerable wealth, leaving his children a strong financial footing.

For young Fernando, this inheritance represented stability—until it was taken from him. Of the ten houses he inherited from his father, nine were seized under the government’s housing ceiling laws. The loss left him angry and disillusioned, his sense of security shattered. Yet from that frustration emerged a quiet resolve—the spark that would later drive him to build something of his own.

Despite this setback, Fernando never sought compensation—by 1972, he had already left Sri Lanka for the Netherlands. Even before leaving, at just 21, he had begun charting his own path, managing a small guesthouse called Lake Lodge before opening his own establishment in 1971—which he fondly describes today as the country’s first “boutique hotel.”

In the Netherlands, he immersed himself in a new culture, mastering the language—a skill he retains to this day. He met his German wife in Europe and married her in New Zealand, where his journey continued for several years, subsequently moving to Australia for ten years. In Australia, Fernando worked at the Hyatt Hotel for five years, an experience that deepened his appreciation for hospitality and design, laying the foundation for his signature aesthetic.

Thirty-eight years ago, despite once confessing that he “hated” the country and never wished to return, Fernando found himself back in Sri Lanka. Two pivotal events led to this decision: first, the sudden dip in the Australian dollar, which affected his import business; and second, a more personal revelation involving his wife’s experience working in elder care, where she witnessed the loneliness of aging parents left behind. Moved by what they saw, the couple chose to return home in 1987 with their two young daughters, even as the country faced the turmoil of insurgency.

For Fernando, it was a return to rediscovery. Despite chaos, he found Sri Lanka offered something profoundly human—a quality of life rooted in warmth,

connection, and time for people, unlike the hurried pace of the developed world.

The Gallery Café, once the office of the legendary architect Geoffrey Bawa, became a space where art, design, and gastronomy converge—a true reflection of Fernando’s vision of living beautifully in every sense.



Festive elegance at Paradise Road — where timeless design meets holiday charm.

Business Philosophy and Working with Craftspeople

Fernando’s business philosophy is simple—design products with global appeal, crafted through the hands of Sri Lankan artisans. He owns no factories but works with two porcelain and ceramic factories in Sri Lanka, both of which produce his designs exclusively for his collection while he collaborates directly with local craftspeople, refining their existing skills through his design sensibility. The result is a collection of distinctive, handcrafted pieces that, as he poetically says, are “produced with tiny blessings.”

A self-made man, Fernando insists, ‘I don’t work for money, I work for success—because if you’re successful, the money will follow.’ His true joy lies in nurturing creativity—working with craftspeople and helping artists evolve. When artisans bring him their work, he spots potential even when the product doesn’t suit his needs. He then begins designing for them, guiding their craftsmanship toward new possibilities.

It’s not always profitable—he recalls advancing funds for samples that never materialized or spending days in Girandurukotte without seeing a finished product. Yet, the process itself is deeply rewarding. He remembers visiting villages to buy baskets, painting and reselling them; collaborating with potters in Dankotuwa and clay merchants in Kegalle; and fashioning Christmas trees from dried tea bushes—each rooted in creativity and community. His production model is deliberately small-scale, ensuring quality and sustainability since expanding could strain craftspeople financially.

Over the decades, this mindful approach has fostered a loyal network of artisans—many of whom have worked with him for over 30 years. It's a legacy that Fernando takes great pride in: not just the beauty of the products, but the lives he has uplifted through his belief in craftsmanship, authenticity, and enduring human connection.

An Unmatched Brand

Every entrepreneurial journey comes with challenges—and the stories that emerge often inspire others. Fernando's path has been no exception. Along the way, he has faced both triumphs and trials, particularly from those who have attempted to imitate his business model without understanding the dedication and sacrifice that underlie it.

"One of the biggest problems we've had in Sri Lanka," he says, "is that people look at me and think I've found a quick and easy way to make money. It's not quick and it's certainly not easy."

Over the years, foreign entrepreneurs have even taken his merchandise and design ideas to launch competing ventures within Sri Lanka. Yet, Fernando remains unfazed. Offers have come his way to open Paradise Road stores overseas—including in India—but he has politely declined. For him, Paradise Road is not a franchise or a formula to be replicated; it is a deeply personal expression of artistry, authenticity, and place—something that, he believes, belongs right here in Sri Lanka.

Business Expansion and Developing Sri Lanka's Art Market

Guided by an intuition he firmly believes "never lies," Fernando's journey from a modest store with just two employees has blossomed into the iconic Paradise Road brand. What began as a small venture has grown exponentially, branching into multiple locations—including boutique outlets within hotels—and culminating in the flagship store on Galle Road. Today, Paradise Road supplies its timeless creations to many of the island's most distinguished hotels and boutique properties.

Never one to stand still, Fernando continued to expand his creative universe. He diversified beyond retail, adding two celebrated establishments to his portfolio—The Gallery Café and Tintagel Colombo. The Gallery Café, once the office of the

legendary architect Geoffrey Bawa, became a space where art, design, and gastronomy converge—a true reflection of Fernando’s vision of living beautifully in every sense.

Today, The Gallery Café—a seamless blend of restaurant and art gallery—has earned global acclaim, drawing international celebrities and design enthusiasts alike. Its story, however, began with Fernando’s unwavering fascination for a building unlike any other in Colombo. The property had long captivated him; he even admits to bribing the security guard just to slip inside and “fantasize about living there.”

When word spread that the property was available, it sparked a wave of interest among Sri Lanka’s elite. Yet, through a mix of persistence, social connections, and serendipity, Fernando managed to secure the lease—despite competition from Bawa’s own associates. What followed was nine months of painstaking restoration, funded entirely by Fernando himself. Fernando shared a touching story about Bawa visiting The Gallery Cafe after its renovation and opening. Having suffered a stroke, Bawa had not seen the transformation of his property and upon his first visit had appreciated the space, saying it was “very beautiful,” moving both men to tears. Under his watch, Fernando has preserved the building’s architectural integrity, celebrating its place in Sri Lanka’s design heritage. Upon opening the café, he made a personal promise to Bawa—to run the space “to his credit.”

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Shanth Fernando remains a true Sri Lankan paragon of creativity and design innovation.

Fernando credits himself to be the first to put black pork curry on a Western menu, using his own signature recipe. For 28 years, The Gallery Café has retained the very same menu – one that never lost its charm and continues to draw a global audience through its doors.

Beyond its culinary and architectural appeal, The Gallery Café became a cradle for artistic discovery. It served as a launch pad for both local and international artists, a testament to Fernando's uncanny ability to recognize creative potential. As he proudly reflects, he helped shape Sri Lanka's contemporary art market—introducing exhibition previews, printing catalogues and invitations, and hosting elegant openings complete with refreshments, transforming how art was experienced and appreciated.

Among the many success stories born from his gallery is that of Ali Kazim, a Pakistani artist, whom Fernando first encountered at a SAARC exhibition in 2002. Struck by Kazim's talent, Fernando purchased two of his works and invited him to exhibit at Paradise Road Gallery. The show was a resounding success. A year later, Kazim returned with a daring “erotic” collection—work he could not have exhibited in Pakistan due to cultural restrictions—and once again, it was a triumph.

Today, Kazim's art graces the walls of some of the world's most prestigious institutions, including the Tate, MoMA, and museums in Qatar and Sydney. His paintings now command prices of up to £45,000. Fernando, ever the discerning collector, proudly owns ten of Kazim's works—including a rare self-portrait that could fetch £100,000—a reminder of his role not just as a patron of art, but as a cultivator of artistic destiny.



Paradise Road The Gallery Café—a seamless blend of dining and art—where serene courtyards meet bold Sri Lankan creativity.

Establishing one the City's Most Exquisite Boutique Properties

Of course, one cannot overlook what Fernando fondly calls “the feather in my cap” – Tintagel where he had the honor of hosting the Prince of Wales (now King of England) in 2013, along with his wife, then the Duchess of Cornwall. The royal couple stayed at the property for several days. The experience marked a defining milestone in Fernando's journey, for hosting royalty demands an exceptional

standard, one he is proud to have achieved.

Tintagel had long been a prominent residence in Colombo, celebrated both for its colonial era heritage and its history as the home of three of Sri Lanka's leaders.

In recognition of his enduring contribution to art, design, and culture, he was honored with the prestigious title of Kalasuri by the State—a fitting tribute to a life spent shaping beauty, fostering talent, and leaving an indelible mark on Sri Lanka's creative landscape.

How Fernando came to lease the property was, in fact, a matter of chance. He had initially stepped in to help his friend Sunethra Bandaranaike, whose family owned Tintagel. The property was to be rented to the Pakistan High Commission in Colombo, but Fernando's proposal to take it on instead was accepted. He then embarked on extensive renovation that took two years and eight months, a project he proudly claims was funded entirely from his own pocket, all while he continued to pay the agreed rent right throughout the process. He describes the undertaking as one of his "biggest labors of love", a project through which he fully expressed himself in the decor. In 2007, Fernando opened Paradise Road Tintagel Colombo.



The iconic façade of Paradise Road — a destination where design, culture, and craftsmanship converge.

Business Philosophy

Interestingly, although Fernando owns a portfolio of highly valued properties – including a four-storey residence that he intends converting into an art gallery eventually, his flagship store on Galle Road, and several beach properties acquired entirely with his own funds, his business philosophy is rooted in operating on zero debt. As a result, he typically leases rather than purchasing properties for his businesses. "This was the secret to my success", pointed out Fernando, explaining that this approach enabled him to avoid debt while devoting his energy to creating exceptional spaces.

This philosophy shaped many of his most celebrated ventures, including the Paradise Road store on Dharmapala Mawatha, The Gallery Café, Tintagel, and Villa Bentota. The maverick was once again on a path-breaking mission, becoming the

first Sri Lankan to take over an ancestral residence on Dharmapala Mawatha that had been marked for demolition, transforming it into the store space that became Paradise Road's first flagship outlet in the mid-nineties.

At a time when few dared undertake such costly restorations, Fernando set a new paradigm, inspiring many to reclaim and revive heritage properties for commercial use. With Tintagel, he continued this pioneering spirit, becoming the first to convert a heritage residence into a boutique hotel.

He takes pride in never defaulting on rent payments and consistently paying his employees and suppliers on time. He specially mentions Villa Bentota.

Fernando turned it into yet another iconic property that reflected his appreciation of Bawa's aesthetic – a space he enhanced with Bawa's design ethic (The property was eventually released following the pandemic).



Shanth Fernando, a Sri Lankan icon of creativity and timeless design.



The Red Bar at Tintagel—crimson walls, baroque glamor, and unmistakable Tintagel style.



Tintagel: colonial elegance shaped by history and legacy.

Art Collection and Legacy

Fernando is himself a passionate and discerning collector, with a remarkable collection exceeding 1,000 original paintings by luminaries such as George Keyt, Justin Deraniyagala, Manjusri, Ivan Peiris, Aubrey Collette, George Claessen, ACGS Amarasekara, and David Paynter, alongside 150 original photographs by Lionel Wendt. He envisions one day transforming his home into a gallery, a testament to a

lifetime devoted to art. Equally fulfilling for him is seeing his daughters, Annika and Saskia, carry forward his legacy—one carving her own path as a designer with her own label, the other leading an art gallery. He fondly remembers his late wife, Angelika, as his “rock,” whose unwavering support laid the very foundation of Paradise Road.

Fernando’s business philosophy is grounded in integrity: never borrowing, never lending, never seeking political favors, paying suppliers promptly, and avoiding credit. “I work damn hard to make that money—and I pay my taxes. I don’t cheat people,” he says with characteristic candor.

Honesty, diligence, determination, and faith have guided him through four decades of enterprise. He takes pride not only in building landmarks across Sri Lanka but also in creating products that authentically represent the country to the world. In recognition of his enduring contribution to art, design, and culture, he was honored with the prestigious title of Kalasuri by the State—a fitting tribute to a life spent shaping beauty, fostering talent, and leaving an indelible mark on Sri Lanka’s creative landscape.

Having gracefully passed the biblical age of three score and ten, Udayshanth Jayantha Fernando stands as a testament to the meanings embodied in his names. Conversations such as this reveal the interesting anecdotes behind individuals who have contributed much to society.

Fernando was a long-awaited addition to his family – a wish come true for parents who dearly hoped for a son. His delighted mother travelled all the way to India in search of a name while his father wished for him to carry the initials U and J in honor of his grandfather. And, so, a son of the soil was named, one who would go on to shape a new design language for Sri Lanka.



A candid moment that reflects quiet leadership and creative vision.

It’s striking how his names reflect the essence of the man he became – Udayshanth, meaning “peace of the morning”, and Jayantha signifying victory. Together they capture his journey and accomplishments. Perhaps, the name itself suggests the design aesthetic Fernando has championed all along – one free of “frills and swirls”, defined instead by clarity, purity of form, good taste, and an enduring sense of

calm. Guided by his philosophy to life and business, victory has remained a constant in his story.

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