

# Udayshanth Fernando and the Story of Living Design

Posted on

For over four decades, Udayshanth Fernando has transformed the way Sri Lankans experience design. The publication of *Living Design* by Rizzoli New York marks a defining moment by placing his journey and Sri Lankan design on the international stage, establishing the impact of his lifelong vision.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Shanth at home. The white-cube gallery space at his residence houses his Lionel

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Wendt photography collection.

Building on this foundation, through Paradise Road, The Gallery Café, Tintagel Colombo, and many design ventures, Udayshanth Fernando has built a creative universe that is recognizable yet defies a single style. His aesthetic shapes Sri Lanka's contemporary visual identity, influencing hospitality, retail, art collecting, and interior design.

This creative journey has been extensively documented. Touted as the first monograph of his work, the book was Saskia's idea, not Fernando's. "On my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, my daughter gave me a folder and promised to document my life's work. This is the result after six years," he says.

The result is a lavishly produced monograph that chronicles an entire philosophy of living—one that has always placed design at the center of everyday life.



'Living Design' traces the extraordinary journey of Udayshanth Fernando and the world he has built through design.

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The book features essays by Sean Anderson, architect, scholar and curator; Sonal Singh, head of Christie's India and a specialist in modern and contemporary Indian art; and Bandana Tewari, cultural journalist and former Editor-at-Large of Vogue India. The photographs are by Sebastian Posingis and Dominic Sansoni. As Fernando notes, they know him and his work well enough to offer an honest and insightful perspective on his creative journey.



Commissioned specifically for the living room of Shanth's private residence, this artwork by Jagath Ravindra (b. 1963) exemplifies the painter's knack for crafting expansive sensorial fields that echo impressionistic sensibilities through abstraction. Shanth has decorated the tables in front of the work with his expansive collection of Buddhist artifacts from various periods.

Further reflecting his design philosophy, Fernando's world centers on an extraordinary private art collection with over a thousand original works housed in his home. The residence was built around the collection, featuring a central gallery space of nearly 4,000 square feet.

What visitors encountered at the Galle Road gallery during the launch exhibition represented only a fraction of what exists behind those walls, maybe just five percent, remarks Fernando.

The displayed works were chosen to complement Living Design, letting visitors see the book's featured pieces in person. For Fernando, the collection is about more than ownership; he plans to turn his home into a public gallery, reflecting his belief

that art should be shared and accessible.



Burmese alabaster Buddha heads (ages unknown) sit atop a Dutch-period (1658-1796) jackwood-and-ebony storage chest in the entrance hallway

of Shanth's private residence. Behind the installation, a work by artist Mahen Perera (b. 1977) creates a contrast in the surface quality. The work exemplifies the artist's deft handling of material, imbuing it with a rich textural quality that evokes the appearance of chipped and weathered wood, adding depth and tactile resonance to the abstract form.

Fernando describes himself as a "clever art collector," but the phrase understates the instinct that has guided him for decades.

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Before many artists found acclaim, Fernando identified talent, acquired works, and gave up-and-coming creators exhibitions at Paradise Road Galleries and The Gallery Cafe. He finds fulfillment in discovering and supporting artists, making Paradise Road Galleries a top platform for contemporary art in Sri Lanka. For nearly thirty years, his spaces have held exhibitions regardless of commercial outcome, with each receiving the same attention and care. For Fernando, it's about creating opportunities and nurturing an artistic community, not profit.

His early support for artists shaped both his gallery's reputation and his success.

This generosity made him one of the nation's top collectors. By spotting talent before the market, he built a collection of lasting cultural and financial value.



In Shanth's library, a montage of portraiture by artists Ali Kazim (b. 1979), Rajni Perera (b. 1985), and Mayantha Perera (b. 1994) hang on the wall behind a bruised leather Chesterfield sofa and an antique

Chinese opium  
bed (n.d.).

Of course, his art-collecting spree began more than four decades ago, when Sri Lanka had some of the greatest painters in its history. Among his prized possessions is a rare masterpiece by the legendary Sri Lankan artist George Keyt, a painting of the Sangaraja Pirivena of the Malwatte Chapter, acquired decades ago for a fraction of what it would command today. Stories such as these are woven throughout his collection, stories of timing, intuition, and belief. If there is one word Fernando repeatedly returns to when describing his work, it is “eclectic.”

One recurring theme in *Living Design* is Fernando’s pride in his Sri Lankan identity. Although his work enjoys international recognition and appeal, he remains deeply rooted in the country that shaped him. “I’m proudly Sri Lankan,” he says.

Continuing this thread, the Paradise Road aesthetic is celebrated for merging contrasts: old and new, East and West, antique and contemporary. Yet Fernando resists easy categorization. He draws inspiration from many cultures, eras, and disciplines. “I combine ancient objects, modern objects, modern furniture, furnishings, carpets, and antique carpets,” he explains. In his creative world, things both complement and contrast. Remarkably, Fernando did this without formal training. “I’m self-taught,” he says. The result is an individual sensibility that now resonates with audiences beyond Sri Lanka.

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He views the Rizzoli publication as a chance to showcase Sri Lankan creativity to a global audience, advancing the message that Sri Lankan design has a vibrant, unique voice that challenges outdated perceptions and deserves international recognition.

For decades, Sri Lankan design has been viewed mainly through a lens of tropical modernism and colonial influences. Fernando’s work offers an alternative. His interiors escape convention. “Minimalism is finished,” he says. “People need

warmth.” That warmth is everywhere—from The Gallery Café’s weathered walls to the curated objects in his home. His spaces carry memory, patina, and personality.

Despite the spotlight on his career, Fernando credits discipline for his success. Intensely private, he often declines social events others consider essential.

He believes that surrounding oneself with art, objects, and beautiful spaces creates environments that nurture creativity, conversation, and experience. For Fernando, design is not a distant ideal but a way of life.

This focus on discipline and privacy is born of necessity—time. His days are split among a wide range of roles: retailer, product designer, hotelier, restaurateur, collector, curator, and entrepreneur. He is deeply involved in every area of his businesses.

Such personal involvement also extends to his most enduring enterprises. The Gallery Café’s nearly thirty-year run is a result of his hands-on approach.

“I go there every day,” he says. The consistency patrons expect results from his constant attention and refusal to compromise standards. His unwavering commitment stems from experience. Beneath success lies resilience. Fernando lost both parents by nineteen, and by twenty-two, land reforms had stripped away much of his family’s wealth. He rebuilt from the ground up. Thus, he credits perseverance rather than privilege for his current position.

“I focused on my life to succeed, not to make money.” Wealth followed as a consequence of pursuing excellence rather than as the goal.



The flower satinwood and ebony almirah from the Dutch period (1658–1796) is positioned at the end of the entrance hallway. A Chinese sandstone head of an empress from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Javanese bronze statue of Lord Shiva (n.d.), antique jars, and a Flemish chandelier decorate the view. Above one jar hangs three self-portraits by Dileepa Jeewantha (b. 1980) that capture the artist in varying poses and emotional states. Jeewantha creates introspective self-portraits that explore the complexities of ego and self-perception. His work is known for its quirky and spontaneous style, combining skillful execution with applied randomness.

The title “Living Design” captures Fernando’s message: design enriches everyday life and should be integrated into it. He believes that surrounding oneself with art, objects, and beautiful spaces creates environments that nurture creativity, conversation, and experience. For Fernando, design is not a distant ideal but a way of life. As Living Design reaches shelves around the world, it carries more than a personal narrative: it shares the story of a Sri Lankan visionary who has elevated his country’s design legacy while staying rooted at home. For Udayshanth Fernando,

this impact—shaping global perceptions—stands as his most meaningful achievement.