

Palinda Kannangara The Courtyard

Photographed by IKER ZUÑIGA
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“To understand my architecture it’s important to know the client and how they use the space,” notes Palinda Kannangara from his studio in Colombo, Sri Lanka - a dark grey concrete construction of his own making. Renowned for his builds across Sri Lanka, the country has provided the architect a framework of sorts, a set of possibilities and limitations within which he designs freely.

“Here the context is very well known to me, and the client’s wishes too,” notes Kannangara, who, through his work, has studied the Sri Lankan way of living, “in order to match my work to the client’s lifestyle.” Extending into every element of the project, Kannangara’s conception of context is present in both form and function; the colours and materials; the collaborators and craftsmen. Thus far, the architect’s commitment to his anthropological approach has seen him realise projects solely in Sri Lanka – however, during the Pandemic (a time that represented a break from the norm, for many of us, in many ways) an opportunity presented itself in Bangalore, India, which allowed Kannangara and his team an interesting change of context.

“I’ve been to Bangalore on-and-off for a long time, so it is not a new place to me, but I was waiting for the right place and the right project.” Initially, the client expected Kannangara to replicate his architecture from Sri Lanka, “something closely inspired by my work here, but I said, no, I’m not going to do that. [What I build in Bangalore] will be the same in that it is under my control and my guidance – the concept is the same, the lines, the way I work with materials – however, the choice of materials, how I address the climate and the user will be different in this different context.”

Relocating his ‘local’ approach, Kannangara’s study of the area led him to the Tipu Summer Palace in Bangalore, and, more specifically, to a small pavilion

set in its grounds: a minimal, open-air structure, a place of shaded privacy in and amongst the vibrant gardens.

Fascinated by the pavilion’s double-colonnade veranda structure, which creates long shadows that permeate the space – providing a delicious sense of cool and quiet – Kannangara began translating its structure into something that would be useful, meaningful, beautiful to his client.

The brief was very open: the couple wished to focus on their family, and recalled moments from their own childhoods - the trees that they remembered smelling, the fruits that they picked – expressing their desire to create the same such memories for their two young daughters. Less a brief, and more a poem.

Through these conversations, it became clear that the garden should be central, and thus, the narrow plot was divided in three, with a building placed at each end – one to house the family, the other all of the more functional elements of a home. Between the two is a courtyard, “a breathing space between two pavilions.”

The private quarters are enclosed on the upper level, whilst the ground floor remains permanently open; an unsealed and unlocked veranda, much like that of the Tipu Palace, which creates a sense of continuous flow and connection between inside and out. Details and intricacies were developed from this point.

Windows and openings were designed so that their frames and lines never disrupted the continuity of the space. The courtyard is paved in a local stone, with pieces that grow larger in size and finer in texture as one approaches the main house – blending seamlessly with the polished stone in the veranda, and the cut cement floors beyond that.



Likewise, the walls are finished in the same colour and material throughout – a warm neutral, somewhere between pink and cream. Distinguished only by a subtle change in surface texture – the inside walls have a softness and a sheen, whilst the exterior is a touch more coarse. Similar to lime plaster, Kannangara found a local alternative that was tinted with earth pigments, and the end result is a finish that “controls the light and softens the reflections.”

Enthralled by the variety of materials that Bangalore had to offer, Kannangara took full advantage of India’s rich resources. From this palette, he selected chapadi stone and local granite for the floor; vibrant earth pigments for the walls; and brass, which runs between the cut-concrete slabs creating a glinting grid, the dark grey of the concrete shot through with gold-toned stripes.

Constructed in steel and teak, the off-cuts from the upper level were reimagined to provide privacy from the neighbouring houses. Woven into a double-layered grid that allows the air to move freely, the wooden screen was originally designed for just one wall, “however, the carpenter made another [by mistake], and so we decided to use it to connect the screen to the facade, as a wrap around treatment – which really improved the design.”

“[For me], you need the flexibility to improve as it’s being built, you can’t decide everything before construction, because if you do, you’ll inevitably ignore some really beautiful possibilities. Our design development isn’t just three or six months at the beginning of the project, it is continuous – and that’s the secret.”

Whilst many wonderful details came about through the process of making, Kannangara remained true to the concept, of the sentiment, at its heart. In the central courtyard, there are three sacred trees - Neem, Champa and Bakula - whose flowers and leaves are part of the family’s daily offering at pooja, and there is a gooseberry tree, heavy with plump green fruits, “for the children, and birds, to pick and eat from...”

