

National Design Centre shines at ‘Shilpa 2014’ exhibition with the return of Archt.Tilak Samarawickrema as Consultant after 27 years

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The recently concluded National Exhibition and Trade Fair ‘Shilpa 2014’ held at Sirimavo Bandaranaike Memorial Exhibition Centre, saw a stark revival of the National Design Center (NDC) which had an impressive individual exhibition pavilion as one of the joint organizers of the event. The exhibition which was held from 28th to 31st August 2014 is an annual event organized by the Ministry of Traditional Industries and small Enterprise Development under the purview of Hon. Minister Douglas Devananda.

The National Design Centre (NDC) was established in 1983, and has as its prime objective, the development of the Indigenous Craftsmen. This year NDC has re-appointed as its Design Consultant Archt.Tilak Samarawickrema who inaugurated the ‘Silpa’ exhibition in 1987 when he was first appointed as the Design Consultant to NDC on an ILO assignment in March 1986. Tilak Samarawickrema is a name synonymous in the field of art, architecture and design here in Sri Lanka and internationally. His contribution to the development of arts and crafts of Sri Lanka saw a transcending of the traditional craft to a contemporary aesthetic order preserving the traditional roots at its core.

This year’s NDC exhibition witnessed the input of Archt.Samarawickrema on his return after 27 years. In six months he worked in collaboration with the other designers and the best and most skilled NDC craftsmen to develop the designs, colour combinations and techniques to produce the artifacts for the exhibition. The products included many reproductions from the first ‘Silpa’ exhibition in 1987 as well as many new designs.

The workshop at Katubedda which has five product development sections had produced items which included rush and reed, terracotta, coir, cane and bamboo and timber. The items from Nattarampotha workshop in Kandy included brass, lacquer and leather products. Each of these sections has a lead designer and together with the craftsmen they facilitated Tilak Samarawickrema’s design intensions and the good rapport within the group was evident in the success of the exhibition. Many retired craftsmen who had worked with Archt.Samarawickrema in the 80’s have returned on contract basis and their knowledge and skill has been channeled again in this design revival.

In observing the artifacts it is immediately evident that the products of this pavilion were not mere handicrafts but are works of art. It depicts how a simple genius design intervention can transform

craft to a timeless piece of art - the essence of a rich tradition blended to the spirit of contemporary design innovation. The forms, colours, patterns, motifs and even simple utensils of the past is presenting itself in a new light that can touch the modern art enthusiast's spirit in the highest order. The many years of exposure Tilak Samarawickrema had in Italy during the height of a cultural blossoming in the 70's and 80's has given him the impetus to bring local crafts to a contemporary international design standard. Another noteworthy aspect is the exquisite workmanship of the products- the love and labour gone in to perfecting the finish. If this level of workmanship is maintained in all other arts and crafts, it will not be too difficult for Sri Lanka to make a significant presence in the export market.

Some of the eye catching products included the sculptural terracotta horse heads, terracotta 'Pahan gewal' (outdoor shrines), colourful lacquer containers and stupas, jewelry from a variety of materials, hand painted lady figure- a copy from the Jaffna museum and the famous Dumbara tapestries. It also included the sculptural lacquer and wood toy Tilak Samarawickrema had designed for Magnoform New York in 1993. There was a series of simple and elegant cane products catering to the hospitality industry. Good design is where beauty, purpose and function intersect. It must consider cultural perspectives, emotions and practical needs in creating something that matters to someone. That was the success of the products that were on display.

The layout of the exhibition was complimentary to the products on display. The minimalistic contemporary feel was maintained within the given shell, with a series of white painted boxes on a bare cement floor composed in a manner to dramatically highlight the display items. The entrance pathway was celebrated with a series of traditional 'kodi gas' on either side (decorative trees carried on bicycles commonly seen in Peraheras) directing one's eyes towards a sculptural arrangement of lit terracotta shrines.

The National Design Centre exhibition was also a commercial success as it managed to secure orders from many leading business organizations and also in terms of sales. However the sales aspect of the overall exhibition I believe was not organized well enough to cater to the demand it created. Hopefully this issue may get resolved in the future at least with respect to the National Design Centre, as it is fostering plans to open its own design store. It is hoping to develop its branding and this will set a new benchmark for all the arts and crafts products in the country.

Archt.Tilak Samarawickrema has a vision for the future of the National Design Centre. In his point of view NDC should become the leading design agency- the nexus of all design fields in the country, the place where ideas are exchanged and promoted, design and business meet and facilities provided. It should revive the waning crafts traditions which have timeless qualities for future generations. Design improves the quality of lives of the user and the producer. Therefore good design must be fostered and promoted.

In an increasingly ideas driven economy, Sri Lanka is yet to tap the design businesses in its full potential. Design is an enabler to realize potential, create new values and markets and solve problems. The NDC has a task to raise awareness and deepen the appreciation of good design. It can contribute to boost Sri Lanka's position and attractiveness in the global design market and significantly contribute to

economic growth. There has never been a better time for it than the present, as the country is witnessing a boom in the tourism industry which directly impacts the said market. Historically, Architects -the professional descendants of the master craftsmen have been in the forefront of many a cultural revival around the world and maybe this is Sri Lanka's time.