

Build your own home

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My first impression, given the theme of your workshop, was that it was a massive "Do it Yourself" exercise. Just as doctoring yourself, or being your own lawyer, is haz-

ardous, being your own Architect is not something I would recommend.

It is not because I am a past President of the Institute of Architects and fear that we will be done out of our jobs that

I do not recommend you being your own architect, but because the essence of the task of an architect is to get an insight into the collective psyche of the family and to interpret its wants into needs. This, I

fear, you will not be able to do, since you are very much a part of the subject being interpreted.

However this appears to be a principle that is not very well understood, and I am afraid that one of the reasons why some of you do not consult an architect to have your house designed, is because you feel, that if you do, he will take over!

But consider how many of you will continue to go to a doctor who promptly does what you request and cuts open your nose because you have suggested it as an answer to your problem about difficulty in breathing! This of course wouldn't happen, because you will not tell him what to do. You will be glad to have him "take over". You will only tell him your problem and what you want - that you find it difficult to breathe, and that you want that difficulty removed. You wouldn't dare tell your doctor, that the problem seems to be the nose, that you always had a thin nose, that you had an aunt who continually pinched your nose etc., and then ask him to open it up! Even if you would (my wife) does this to her dentist, the doctor would not do it, because he is not a technician taking instructions. The doctor is a professional who responds to needs which he diagnoses after observing the symp-

toms. The architect does the same by listening to your wants.

This is why you cannot "do it yourself". Not only cannot you interpret your own wants, you wouldn't know the implications of responding to the needs that underlie these wants. For instance, you cannot simply open up a bedroom wall because you like views - you then lose security, privacy and allow rain, sun and crawling creepers in! You then put glass and a payola, and ventilation suffers. You then raise the pergola and protection suffers. To ensure privacy you put curtains, and you haven't got any views!

The architect is trained to resolve several conflicting demands, and to find one single answer to several needs. He can do this because he knows the implications of each solution. This is what he is trained to do.

It is a common sentiment to feel that it is your family, your life, and that you know more about it than anybody else, and therefore, that you should be able to design your own home. That you only need somebody to draw up the plans.

On the other hand, you would not say, it is my body, my face and therefore I will do my own Plastic Surgery! I only need somebody to hand me the instruments!

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Is designing a home as specialised as practising Plastic Surgery? It is, if you want a Home - which is much more than a house. This is not a concept we have cooked up to justify our fees.

Clare Cooper says that a Home is an extension of the self (of a person, of a family), just as much as your clothes are, the wrist watch and the shoes you wear are.

These words of wisdom deserve a second reading. A house, simply gives you physical or utilitarian comfort. It is functional. It works. But this is not enough for a home. A home has to satisfy the basic needs. How many of us will wear dresses, shirts made up of cotton that crush readily, even though it may be the most functional? Don't we often and always sacrifice a bit of function for higher needs? Psychological, spiritual comfort is far more important than physiological comfort - and that is what Kahlil Gibran is speaking about, and what a Home is about.

A house becomes a Home when it does more than keep the elements out, and functions well. That it is "nice looking" does not make it a Home. A series of interesting features picked from here and there, only goes to make it an object to look at, to be written about, but rarely a place to live in - which is what a Home is.

A Home is the most personal of Built Environments one has to create. It needs to convey the correct message about the owner, and the image and the effect one wants to create. In addition to being "practical", the Home should make one comfortable and confident. It has to fit one's personality, feed his spirit and as Kahlil Gibran says, "... be a mast not an anchor".

Designing is about creating an environment to fit the place, the people, the activity and the purpose for which it is built.

Designing for one individual involves understanding his priorities, tolerance levels, like and dislikes and his dreams and aspirations. These are very individual and vary from person to person. An individual has his idiosyncracies. A Home is generally for several such individuals, who are at the same time, separate distinct entities, but also form a distinct integrated unit with a subculture of its own. A family home therefore has to be designed for its collective personality, while catering to the individual differences. For instance, the "living room" of one family may be very different to that of another, based on the very perception of what "living" is. Is living focused on "putting up a front" to society? or is it a refuge, a getaway from the rat

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race; or is it a place for stimulation and "living it up?" All these are legitimate needs a Home should cater to. But what about the teenage son who cannot abide the family orientation? Does he have a choice, an escape or do we bend him, even at home, to fit into the family mould?

The 21st Century will either bring more pressure on individuals or families (so that their Homes need to be places designed sensitively to fit the emotional needs); or will be a time when technology will release man from menial tasks, and give him more leisure time, thus making him more discerning and demanding, requiring his built environment, including the Home, to be much more than "nice places".

Building a Home is one of the largest investments a family makes. Often it is a once a lifetime effort. It is therefore imperative that it is "done" properly and with specialist advice. Built environment affects man emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. An infant mind can be scarred for life by an unsympathetic environment. To a young mind, it symbolizes the adult world.

Just as it is foolish to "doctor" yourself, play amateur psychiatrist, so it is dangerous to play games with designing your own home.

This does not mean that you give over the right to determine what your house should be like to an architect. You simply get his expert advice to decipher as to what lies behind your very specific wants. The Architect will work out the actual needs that underlie the Wants and will be able to satisfy these so that your satisfaction is deeper, more enduring, better coordinated, and obtained at less cost and with an eye on other factors such as ventilation, natural light, air movement etc. He will design it with you.

There is nothing worse than a tele drama made up of interesting "episodes" picked from a variety of sources. So is a Home made up of interesting features, which, after the initial novelty has worn off, will then retain only a "Super-market" persona.

Nor is architecture only for the rich - just as good drama, good music is not only for the intellectuals and the esthetes. Art is what makes life bearable, and this affliction is greater among the middle classes. Middle classes thus need the services of architects more than any other sector of the Sri Lankan society. Their's is a problem of high expectation, born of good education (and even travel), and low

affordability. Unlike in the past, the bulk of architects in Sri Lanka are drawn from the different layers of its Middle Class - Middle Income sector. They are approachable and conscious of the problems and needs of the Middle Class Home Builder.

The architect is more than an artist. Being an artist does not make one eligible to design a home. Nor does being a scientist - an engineer - qualify him, since designing a Home goes beyond making sure that the building does not collapse or that the sewerage system works. But the architect is also a scientist, and a psychologist, a manager, and many other things to a Home Builder. His is a unique blend of skills.

The only service he does not give is to build it - except under very special circumstances. This is to avoid undesirable conflicts of interests and to enable the architect to give his client service of integrity and high standards. If the architect also builds, or is a "contractor", he cannot perform this function.

The 21st Century Sri Lankan Houses will thus require the services of Architects. All qualified architects in Sri Lanka carry a Membership Card of The Sri Lanka Institute of Architects and are authorized to describe themselves as Chartered Architects. Any inquiries may be made from the SLIA.

But what happens to those of us who cannot afford the services of an architect; if he cannot pay the Professional Fees of an architect? And there are so many in this category, partly because of our lop sided education which does not teach us to put round pegs in round holes.

For this category of people the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects has devised a scheme called SLIA Design Aid Scheme.

It is a free advisory service for those who have specific problems in the design of their houses. A panel of very eminent architects are involved in answering these questions and where such answers are not enough, the panel will meet them, at the SLIA, to explain matters further. All this is free! We have a third step. If a member of the public is still not satisfied and wants further and individual consultancy assistance (and still maintains that he cannot afford the fees of an architect), we have a scheme whereby he may be put in touch with a senior student of architecture who may be able to help him for a token payment for his time.