



## **CENTRAL COURTYARDS**

*Wild berry trees rise up through the twin atriums (one shown, right) that form the heart of this Modernist home. White-painted walls interspersed with dark concrete slurry walls help bounce light into the rooms that lead off the courtyards.*

# *Living inside serenity*

*Set within a Modernist cube, these shaded courtyards and darkened rooms are the Abeyrathna family's refuge from the tropical heat and frenetic streets of central Colombo*

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## LIVING AND DINING AREA

*Situated on a mezzanine that lies between the two garden courtyards, the living and dining space (above and opening page) enjoys a cross circulation of air. Furniture made from teak, cement and water-resistant leather withstands the hot, humid winters and the heavy rains between April and August.*

**W**hen the demands of work required that businessman Sarath Abeyrathna and his wife Rohini move with their sons, Anushka and Avishka, and daughter, Suvini, to live in Colombo, the commercial capital of Sri Lanka, they made their first home in one of the many modern apartments that now populate the city's commuter outskirts.

It was a gentle introduction to life in this historic seaport set on the East-West trading route that was once the main artery of business for the Romans, Arabs, Persians and Chinese, and later, was a colony of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British.

The apartment was convenient, with all the mod cons needed to cope with Sri Lanka's hot, humid climate, but it lacked the charm and serenity of the village properties that Sarath and his family were accustomed to: tropical houses built in such a way that air is allowed to circulate naturally through shaded rooms without sacrificing views of, and interaction with, the surrounding natural environment.

"I grew up in a rural village outside Colombo and had little knowledge of architecture or thoughts of building a home," says Sarath. However, Colombo and, in particular, exposure to the Tropical Modernist house designed by the great Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa for Mrs Ena de Silva in

the city's suburb of Cinnamon Gardens, were to prove a spur to Sarath's creative instincts.

Coupled with the demands of a growing family, a move away from the city was ruled out and the Abeyrathnas decided instead to find a way of enjoying a more rural lifestyle within Colombo itself. The question was, how?

"We wanted a house that would feel free and homely," Sarath says, "one that would be practical for a young family but that would also satisfy our emotional need for somewhere calm and serene."

Push him further and he says, "We wanted a house that would have a courtyard filled with greenery as its focus, somewhere that would provide us with a comfortable refuge from the tropical climate while at the same time allowing us to enjoy nature right inside the house."

It is a description that finds an echo in the ethos of Geoffrey Bawa's buildings. As the author Michael Ondaatje wrote in a tribute to his fellow countryman's work, Bawa's buildings were "wonderful edifices that often felt and looked better from the inside than the outside". To Sarath, they were the encouragement he needed to take the bold step of building the family home he desired from scratch.

His search for someone capable of turning his emotions and expectations into bricks and mortar with soul led to an introduction to the work of



### EXTERIOR

*The double slatted teak screen (top left) maintains privacy while keeping the harsh sun at bay.*

### LOGGIAS

*Furniture designed by architect Thisara Thanapathy (above and bottom left) offers further opportunity for the Abeyrathnas to relax away from the hectic pace of Colombo's city life.*

### INNER COURTYARD

*A small pond at the base of the stairwell (below and left) provides an area for quiet reflection, which is often enjoyed by the family (seated, clockwise from bottom left, Rohini, Sarath, Avishka and Anushka).*

**Architect and interior furnishings.** Thisara Thanapathy, 0094 112 545901, thanapathyarchitects.com.  
**Building work.** Duminda Builders, 0094 114 404068, dumindabuilders.com.  
**Similar pressed cement tiles.** £49sq m Mosaic Del Sur, 020 8099 7385, cement-tiles.com ▶





## STAIRCASE

*Thisara has used Merbau timber for the treads and raw steel for the banister. A glass wall further adds to the feeling of space.*

**Similar glass vase.** Cube tall square vase, £30, Habitat, 0844 499 4686, habitat.co.uk.



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architect Thisara Thanapathy. "I'd heard about Thisara and his work through a close friend of mine and our eventual first meeting was a good one," Sarath recalls. "He showed me photographs of buildings he'd already completed and he understood what I wanted, immediately translating my thoughts into sketched plans."

The area that Sarath had selected for his architect-designed home is close to the heart of Colombo, and to the schools and other facilities that he and Rohini wanted for their children. Formerly marshland that had been drained and developed some 20 years earlier, it is surrounded by congested city life; it is beautiful on one side, but haphazard on the other. Furthermore, the houses that encompassed Sarath's particular plot of land "had no collective, strong architectural character", says Thisara, and there was no scope for extending the footprint of the building. "This lack of unity in the materials and roofscapes prompted me to create an inverted-looking house – an introverted courtyard house – and to create a simple exterior that does not compete with the surrounding houses."

Indeed, from the outside, the cube-shaped building appears as innocuous and unremarkable as you could possibly imagine, being just smooth planes of concrete and rendered brick that seem to grow up out of the street and topped by a run of slatted-wood screens. Inside the cube, the effect is rather like a square-shaped doughnut, but with two holes in the middle, instead of one. These are the essential inner courtyards, planted with wild berry

trees, entirely open to the elements and overlooked by the bedrooms on the upper floor.

Set between the two courtyards is a mezzanine that Thisara has designed to rise up like a central platform and house the main living and dining spaces. Open on both sides to the courtyards and therefore to the elements, these spaces are simply furnished by Thisara with his own-designed, weather-resistant tables and chairs. Here also, at the heart of the house, the walls are of dark, exposed concrete, helping to create and emphasise the inner coolness and sense of quietness that Sarath and his family so keenly wanted. Elsewhere, the concrete continues, but is mingled with the more traditional elements of a Sri Lankan country home, including white-painted walls and ceilings left open to reveal their slatted and beamed bones. Interior decoration is equally Modernist, and of the barest minimum needed to service Sarath's lifestyle away from work: relaxing, cooking and spending time with the children.

Of the finished building, Sarath says, "It was so much better than we ever thought it could be; it has all the feeling of a real Sri Lankan home." For Thisara, it is all that and more for, in 2011, his design won him the coveted Geoffrey Bawa Award for the best in contemporary Sri Lankan architectural design. Speaking to *The Sunday Times*, Thisara said, "The work you do must be contemporary and address current issues faced by the community. We must think of preserving greenery and overcoming the stress in people's lives." It is an ethos with which Sarath firmly agrees, and recommends to all. ■



### ANUSHKA'S BEDROOM

*In this serene double-height space (top left, left and bottom left), vast panels of glass not only reveal the lush greenery beyond, they also counterbalance the dark concrete walls, one of which Anushka uses as a blackboard.*

**Similar red paint,** Incarnadine, Estate Emulsion, £34.50 for 2.5 litres, Farrow & Ball, 01202 876141, farrow-ball.com.  
**For blackboard paint,** Chalkboard, £29 for 1 litre, Ecos Organic Paints, 01524 852371, ecospaints.co.uk

### MAIN BEDROOM

*Sliding glass doors (above) have been paired with blackout blinds to provide privacy when required. A low-level bed accentuates the room's high ceiling.*

**Similar teak double bed,** Sleigh bed in dark teak, £1,293, Raft, 020 8450 5098, raftfurniture.co.uk.

### BATHROOM

*For a more rustic effect here, Thisara left the beams exposed and washed the walls and bath surround with a cement slurry.*

