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PULSE people

PEOPLE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

An architect worked on a community project and changed the lives of former soldiers in Sri Lanka, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



As the lights dim in the makeshift hall erected on the grounds of Wisma Lafarge in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, the crowd becomes quiet. A series of images are projected onto the screen. One of them is of a construction site in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It looks like a row of shops is being built and, in the foreground, labourers are covered in dust and carrying baskets of rubble. The speaker, Dr Milinda Pathiraja, isn't impressed with the aesthetics of the buildings and suggests that none of these labourers will learn any special skill.

The need to do the exact opposite of what was projected in this image was the incentive that propelled Dr Milinda to design and develop a project called Community Library in the Sri Lankan countryside. In the process, he became the Global Silver winner for the fourth cycle (2014-2015) for the LafargeHolcim Foundation award.

The Foundation has recently launched its Fifth International Lafarge-Holcim Awards which offers a total of US\$2 million (RM8.9 million) in cash prizes. The main category for this award is open to architects, planners, engineers, students of related disciplines, project owners, builders and construction firms. They should showcase sustainable responses to technological, environmental, socioeconomic and cultural issues within contemporary building and construction. Submission closes on March 21, 2017.

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

There were two parts to the submission that Dr Milinda made for the competition: First, the idea was to create and build a library which would serve the community. Second, it would also provide young men who were former soldiers and from underprivileged backgrounds with on-site construction training.

Smiling, Dr Milinda says that he "fell into" this project and came upon it by chance. Eager to take it on, he adds that in the aftermath of the 25-year civil war in Sri Lanka, while there's so much development taking place, there seems to be a void in the "intellectual development" of the people. "The education system has collapsed," he says.

In an attempt to fill this void, the 40-year-old architect set about both designing and creating this community library. The journey begins with the knowledge that one of the great challenges facing Sri Lanka today is the reintegration of young soldiers. "The war may have stopped, but our problems remain," he says, adding: "So, this project was a series of responses to these problems."

To keep the cost of construction materials as low as possible, Dr Milinda's proposal was to make the walls of the building out of rammed earth. This meant using waste material from a nearby site that was being excavated for a playground. With a small supplement of cement, these walls were then easy to build. In fact, this was the first successful attempt in Sri Lanka to use rammed earth for a building of this



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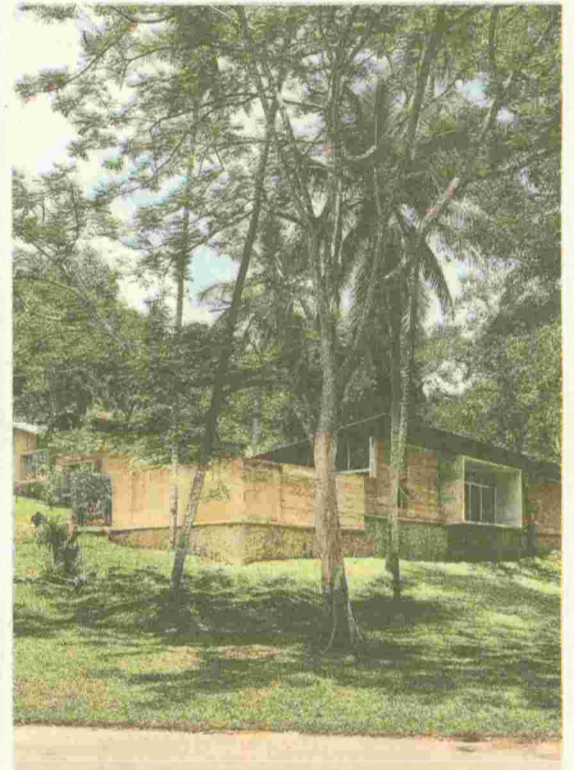
Dr Milinda Pathiraja



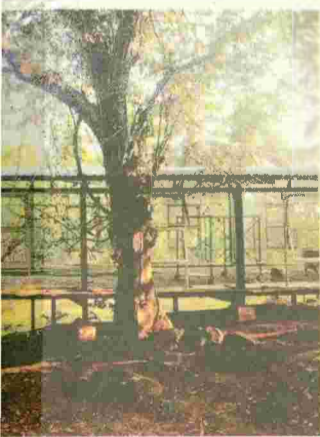
type and scale.

Key materials for the structure and floor were obtained from re-used steel sections gathered from dilapidated old factories and discarded timber railway sleepers collected from a neighbouring train station. There was a concerted effort to show as much respect to the existing trees and the design was created around them. The final outcome was a set of slender buildings that wrapped around an

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The library was built around existing trees.



The community library was built using re-used steel and discarded timber railway sleepers for its walls and floors.

Some of the soldiers who worked on the project.



inner courtyard that took full advantage of cross ventilation and natural light.

ARMY OF WORKFORCE

Then came the more interesting part of this story: Who would be doing all the work? The answer lies in the fact that the community library would be built in Ambepussa, a village about 45km northeast of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. There's a military base located there

called the Ambepussa Army Camp. Many of the people who live in and around the area were once soldiers in the army.

Towards the end of the civil war, explains Dr Milinda, many of these former soldiers were still relatively young because the army had a policy of retiring men when they turned 35. With no skill sets, many often turned to socially unhealthy ways of making ends meet such as becoming members of underworld gangs. The aim,

as such, was to train them in new skills. Instead of using tools of war such as guns and weapons, they'd learn to use tools of construction.

As Dr Milinda tapped into this large workforce, the Melbourne-trained architect discovered something new: Many of the men already had some basic training in skills such as welding and carpentry. An added bonus was their enthusiasm to hone their skills and, perhaps, learn new ones.

ONSITE TRAINING

This decision to assimilate the army's human resource into this building project brought about another dilemma — these soldiers were not going to be trained in a workshop before working on an actual project. Still, Dr Milinda was game for the challenge and the site of this community library became a training ground for developing these soldiers' skills.

As former soldiers, they were used to taking instructions. Once they mastered a skill, they'd be able to replicate the task and improve on it. In all, the building process facilitated a career development path and an opportunity for social integration. "It was an exploration about how architecture can also be pedagogical," he adds.

Naturally, by relying on labourers who were still undergoing training, the final product was bound to be imperfect. Although the errors Dr Milinda is talking about are not perceptible to the naked eye, he insists that some pieces of wood may be half a centimetre too short or long. The point he's making, though, is that he anticipated this and that's why his design was flexible enough to have room to be tolerant.

The success of this project has only reinforced Dr Milinda's belief in the need for social equality. Indeed, he says: "Take care of people and the people will take care of the environment." With pride, he concludes that a lot more was achieved when the Community Library project was completed. Many of these former soldiers used their new set of skills to build other structures in and around their communities.