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# ELLE DECOR

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**50 PAGES**  
TRACING THE  
SILHOUETTES  
OF SRI LANKA

**SPECIAL**  
75 YEARS OF  
LUNUGANGA

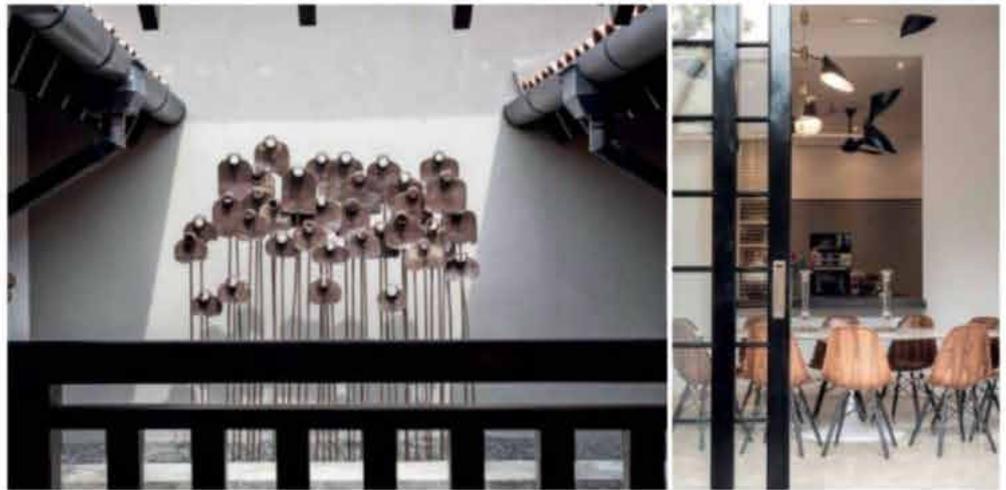
**GUEST EDITOR CHANNA DASWATTE**  
**WHY WE LOVE  
BAWA'S GENIUS**

# ONCE UPON A FORT IN GALLE

TEXT BY **VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SANDUN DE SILVA**

*The Galle Fort has been the magnet for many people from across the world since the early 2000s, when the fort was 'discovered' as the next best thing to the Cote d'Azur! Given its hoary history where it is thought to be the port of Tarshis from whence the sapphires were used by Solomon to woo Bathsheba, and being the port of call for many a traveller from Ibn Battuta down, the Portuguese fortified the port in the 16th Century CE in their bid to wrest the spice and gem trade from the merchants from Arabia. Captured by the Dutch in 1656 and handed to the British in 1798, the fort was a thriving place of trade until the port was shifted to Colombo in the late 19th Century CE. From then on the old fort fell into a stupor until rediscovered to be renovated and lovingly conserved by many like Annika Fernando who saw the value of life in this historic world heritage site.*

**CHANNA DASWATTE**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A custom sculpture by Prageeth Manohansa from Saskia Fernando Gallery crowns the pond beneath; The dining room is minimally outfitted with a Saarinen dining table in Carrara marble and Eames Tulip chairs. The chandelier is a custom design by David Weeks NYC; The central pond, surrounded

by an unfilled, honed travertine floor and misaligned arches, is a focal point from the home's entrance. Polished plaster walls channel a hypnotic quality, furthered by the lofty Burma teak doors on either side. A pot by Prageeth Manohansa from Saskia Fernando Gallery makes for a spectacular centrepiece



The family living room carries vestiges of the past as unfilled, honed travertine floor plays host to a seagrass rug from Paradise Road. The sofas, armchairs, ottomans and coffee table are from Restoration Hardware (RH) with a Mahen Perera artwork on the wall. The sofa cushions feature batik prints by Sonali Dharmawardena **FACING PAGE** The front sitting room cuts a dramatic figure with green walls and a glossy black ceiling. The sofa, lamps, and coffee and side tables from RH mingle with antique ebony armchairs from the Sangakkaras' collection. At the centre, an antique oriental rug, sourced from the UK, underpins custom armchairs. Artworks by Priyantha Udagedara, left, and Yuwantha Yasas, both from Saskia Fernando Gallery, grace the walls





When retired Sri Lankan cricketer legend Kumar Sangakkara and his wife, Yehali, purchased a villa in the island precinct of Galle Fort a few years ago, its state of disrepair was the last thing on their mind (the home was originally built as a residence in the fort and fortified by the Portuguese in the late 1500s, then subsequently captured by the Dutch in the 17th century). The first, was getting on board an interior designer who would match their sensibilities—a cinch, considering they already knew whom they wanted. Having worked with her on their Colombo home sixteen years prior, they were keen to rekindle a working relationship with Annika Fernando, founder and principal of her eponymous Colombo-based multidisciplinary practice. And so they did, trusting her to combine their vision with her own.

"When the Sangakkaras first approached me for this property, and as it evolved over the years, I would often say that I wanted to attempt something different, something less predictable. They were both so supportive and trusting of this view and excited by the idea," recalls Annika, who collaborated with architects Jeewaka De Silva and Murad Ismail for the restoration. But there were risks to nonconformity: specifically, fears of populist backlash. Annika worried that reimagining the home's historic architecture, even with adequate research, could be perceived as dishonouring its heritage. But it was an undertaking she was committed to seeing through.

Most locals know when the Sangakkaras are in town: the doors are perennially open, and the front sitting room, which Annika designed as a 'show feature', dazzles like an emerald jewel box when viewed from the street (its black ceiling and bold green walls make it a natural focal point). >>



FROM LEFT Dark plaster walls cocoon the ground floor guest bathroom, providing a calming, nesting effect. The vanity and side tables are by RH, while the mirror is from Paradise Road. The pendant is Flos's Romeo Babe, sourced from Photonics; Polished plaster walls are contrasted with limestone, grounded by a honed and filled travertine floor in the guest bathroom on the first floor. The butler's tray is from Paradise Road. The painting is the work of H. A. Karunaratne, from the Sangakkaras' private collection **FACING PAGE** Tones of black and white play hide-and-seek in the guest bedroom. The bed and lamps are RH finds. Of particular note are the soft furnishings, custom-made using handwoven fabric sourced from Laos with custom batik by Sonali Dharmawardena. The artwork is by Bandu Manamperi

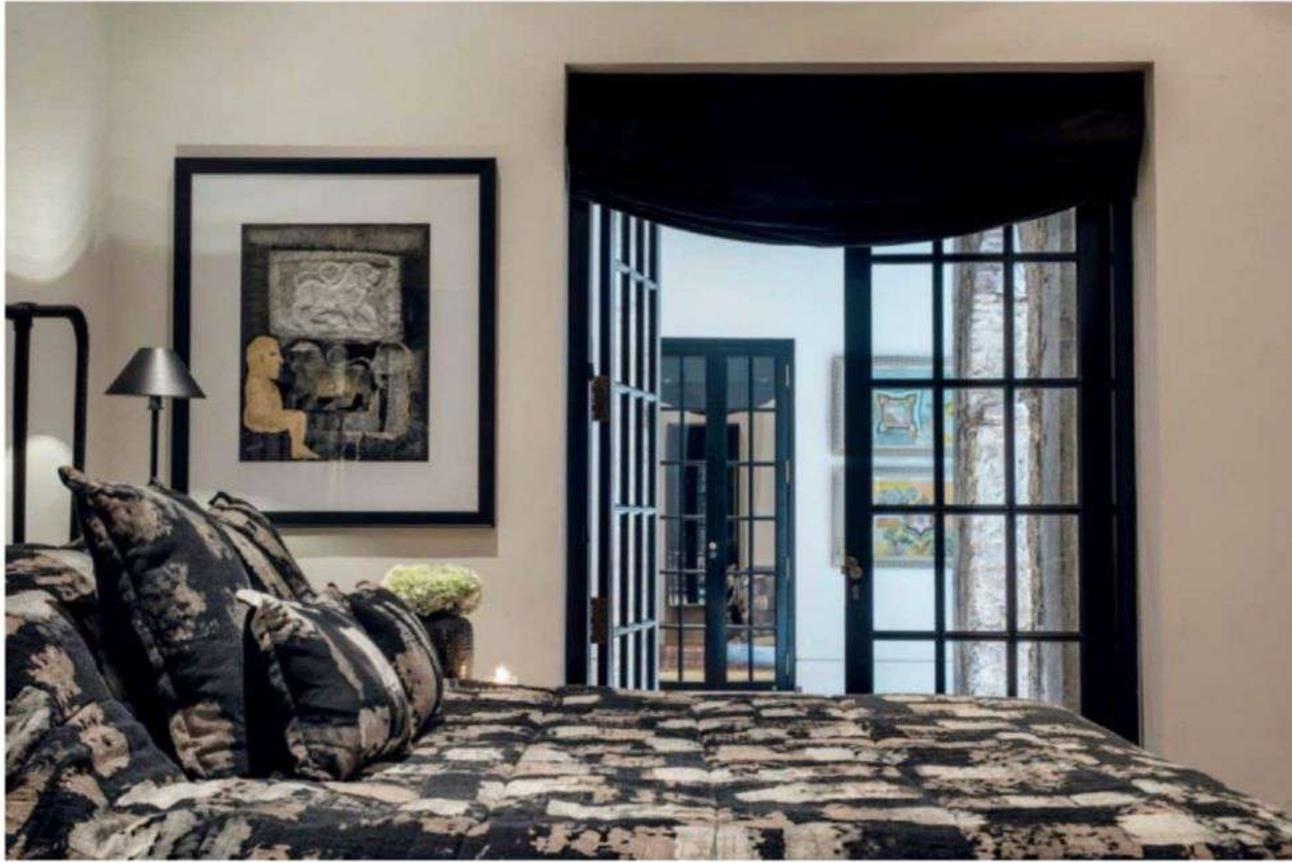


The room, at first, seems like it might serve as an overture to the rest of the home, also comprising a formal living room, a dining room, four bedrooms and four generous bathrooms. But the deeper you venture, the more curiosities await. "Many of the features were actually created. The original property had been restored several times over the years. There was evidence of some refurbishment in the '60s and '70s, and several design additions in the decades prior," says Annika. The result was a spasmodic puzzle, with mismatched heights, asymmetrical arches, and curiously angled windows. The next natural step, then, was getting everything to look like it had been there all along.

Step one of the exercise? Highlighting special historic hallmarks. In the contemporary living room extension, for example, there was evidence of an original oven with markings. Not only did Annika retain this feature, but she also used it as inspiration for the colourway of the handwoven soft furnishings, translated by local batik artist

Sonali Dharmawardena and her artisans. In other areas, she sealed the original walls with a lacquer, revealing their natural patina, while elevating the peripheral shell with a stark white.

In many ways, old inspired new—the central pond, a case in point. In a bid to echo the rusticity of the original architecture, Annika left the newly added concrete unfinished. Likewise for the flooring, she specified a seamless honed and unfilled travertine downstairs and reclaimed Kumbuk (a native Sri Lankan timber) upstairs. The interventions were as rooted in function as in form. "As the walls were erected and refinished, we faced challenges with plaster falling and moisture travelling up walls. I decided as the project evolved, to leave the walls exposed in many areas. It wasn't originally the plan and that's the beauty of allowing a project to naturally evolve, especially in an age where many clients want to envisage everything in advance," Annika shares. >>



“I would often say that I wanted to attempt something different, something less predictable”

Her style, admittedly, leans eclectic. “I enjoy mixing old with new, modern with traditional, to create a warm and tactile interior. Kumar loves to collect chairs and statement pieces, so it led to a really lovely, unique style,” avers the designer. True to her words, the home captures the zeitgeist of many eras at once. Oriental rugs sourced in London underpin antique Sri Lankan chairs, while a table and tulip chairs by Eero Saarinen act as the focal point of the living room. In yet another space, an Eames chair takes the spotlight, whereas a custom chandelier by New York-based David Weeks delivers a voguish flourish in the contemporary dining room extension.

As avid art collectors, Kumar and Yehali had put together a considered art collection over the years. But which wall would play host to which works was never discussed. “During installation, truck loads of paintings were delivered to the site and piled up against the walls for me to pick

and choose from at will. A Prageeth Manohansa bull that was intended for the formal living area just seemed to fit better in the rear sitting room. Most display decisions were instinctual and I had to send the balance back to the Sangakkaras’ Colombo home, much to Yehali’s disappointment,” she recalls with a smile.

“Very often, we get to the end of a build and realise we have bare walls yet to adorn or certain features left to camouflage, but I didn’t have that issue in this house,” Annika observes. For a build estimated to take two years, the designer has few regrets about the extra four. “The project took on a life of its own and there was a natural evolution in the design that would otherwise never have happened,” she adds. In this home, everything and everyone has equal pride of place. ♦