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Minnette De Silva: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Architectural Discourse

In a field historically dominated by men, Minnette De Silva stands as a pioneer whose influence reverberates to date in not only architectural design but also writing, teaching, and scholarly engagement. Recognised as Sri Lanka's first woman architect, De Silva shattered conventions by founding her own architectural practice—The Studio of Modern Architecture—in Kandy in 1948. She was one of the first women architects to set up their own architectural practice in the world. De Silva was also notably the first Asian woman elected as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1948, and she was awarded the Gold Medal by the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects (SLIA) in 1996 for her outstanding contribution to architecture.

De Silva's architectural ethos was characterised by a unique blend of modern design principles and traditional Sri Lankan aesthetics. With a deep reverence for simplicity, functionality, and local culture, she drew inspiration from Sri Lankan craft practices that seamlessly integrate with their environments.

Within her architectural endeavours, De Silva was an advocate for affordable housing, emphasising the importance of livable, well-designed homes for all. Her commitment to social responsibility permeated her work, reflecting a profound belief in architecture's capacity to enhance the quality of life. The exhibition '88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva' on view at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka), which is open until 7 July, sheds light on her visionary approach to providing affordable housing for a diverse community of government public servants, positioning her as a pioneer in socially conscious architecture in Sri Lanka.

De Silva's achievements reverberated globally, contributing to the recognition of women in architecture and inspiring subsequent generations to navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity. Her legacy endures as a testament to her resilience and vision, laying the groundwork for a new era of architectural innovation in Sri Lanka and beyond.

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De Silva's impact extended beyond her architectural practice to encompass writing and scholarly pursuits. Through her writings which span across housing to architectural history in Asia, she provided valuable insights into her projects and broader architectural discourse. Her involvement in founding the MARG magazine in India, and contributions to the South Asian section of the 18th Edition of 'Sir Banister Fletcher's: A History of Architecture' in 1973, and to the 20th Edition of the same in 1996, solidified her as a respected voice within the field, shaping architectural thought and scholarship for generations to come.

As an educator, De Silva left an indelible mark on architectural pedagogy, especially during her tenure at the University of Hong Kong from 1975–1980. Her meticulously curated teaching slides, which she generously donated to the SLIA, continue to enrich architectural education. The teaching slides are on display in '88 Acres' by the MMCA Sri Lanka until 7 July.

De Silva's influence reached far beyond national borders, as evidenced by her participation in the 1947 Congress Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) conference in Bridgwater, United Kingdom, as a representative from MARG. As the sole Asian delegate and the youngest representative, she engaged with luminaries of the modern movement, further cementing her stature within the international architectural community. Her international presence also included the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace in Poland in 1946.

Minnette De Silva's legacy stands as a testament to the enduring impact of vision, determination, and a steadfast commitment to experimentation. Much of her work is chronicled and archived in her celebrated and posthumously published autobiography 'The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect Vol. 1' (1998) which was edited by Ashley de. Vos and Susil Sirivardana. Ashley de. Vos was one of the few architects to recognise De Silva's importance, helping her to prepare the book and going on to publish it at the expense of his own time and resources.

MMCA Sri Lanka's current exhibition '88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva' takes the visitors on a journey through the architectural and social history of one of De Silva's visionary works—the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme. The exhibition is open from 10 am to 6pm daily (except on Poya days and public holidays) for free until 7 July 2024 at the MMCA Sri Lanka at Crescat Boulevard, Colombo.