

Sri Lankan Traditional Motifs in Contemporary Interior Surface Design: Adaptation and Perception

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Abstract – This research examines how contemporary interior surface design in Sri Lanka intersects with culture, tradition, and modern aesthetics through the use of traditional motifs. These motifs, rooted in Sri Lanka's ancient artistic heritage, reflect deep cultural values and historical narratives. The study focuses on how such traditional motifs are adapted and perceived within contemporary interior design, with the aim of preserving cultural identity while exploring their transformative potential in modern living spaces. The research addresses the challenge of balancing heritage preservation with contemporary design requirements, raising questions about the relevance of traditional motifs today and how their cultural values can be revitalized through modern reinterpretation. By investigating the adaptability and aesthetic integration of traditional motifs within current interior design practices, the study contributes to ongoing discourse on cultural continuity and innovation in design. Methodologically, the research employs a combination of archival study and critical analysis of traditional art forms alongside contemporary interior design practices. The findings are expected to demonstrate how traditional motifs can be effectively adapted while retaining their aesthetic and cultural significance. Ultimately, the study aims to advance interior design practice by embedding cultural heritage within modern contexts, thereby extending the legacy of Sri Lankan traditional motifs and enriching contemporary interiors with historical depth and cultural meaning.

Keywords: Sri Lankan Traditional Motifs; Modern Adaptation; Perception; Contemporary Interior Design

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I. Introduction

Sri Lanka's historical identity, elaborated with intricate motifs and designs, serves as a source of inspiration for today's interior surface creations. As the design landscape evolves, a profound interest has emerged in exploring the adaptation of these local Sri Lankan motifs into modern interior surfaces. This research delves into the nuanced process of integrating these traditional motifs within contemporary design models.

Therefore, this research investigates the adaptation of Sri Lankan Traditional motifs in contemporary interior surface design, exploring their adaptation related perception of the designers. Architectural interior surfaces encompass the structural elements shaping a building, including floors, ceilings, walls, and columns. Meanwhile, architectural finishes comprise a variety of surface coverings capable of altering the appearance of pre-existing fixtures and fittings. By investigating their usage in interior surface design in this research, such as wall surfaces, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces and decorative elements; artworks, accent walls, aiming to demonstrate how these can be visualized while contributing to the overall coherence and visual appeal of modern interior spaces that fulfil the elements of an interior to bring out the beauty and unity.

While bringing the perception of the adaptations in the interiors, it is to understand the intensions of using traditional motif designs in the specific interiors by the designers because the perception is how individuals subjectively interpret and respond to their surroundings, products, or experiences. It is influenced by personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs, shaping preferences and behavior. Perception goes beyond merely collecting basic sensory data from the environment, like sight, sound, and touch, but It encompasses a study of experiences, comprehension, and emotional responses to environmental information (Yu et al, 2018).

This research has been done in a qualitative method as a social and cultural research where it is paralleled with interior space design. This research is based on interviews and discussions. In recent years, there has been a notable resurgence in the use of traditional elements in design, as Sri Lankans increasingly seek to celebrate and preserve their heritage. This seeks to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, exploring how traditional motifs can seamlessly merge with contemporary design aesthetics. In this dynamic context, the study aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between culture, identity, aesthetics, and innovation.

The relationship between contemporary art trends and interior architecture has been widely applied, with artists' creations aiding designers in interpreting their works using design principles centered on simplicity, harmony, and cost-effectiveness. Contemporary art serves as a vital component of cultural discussions, addressing aspects of personal and communal identity expression within a community (Hassanein, 2020).

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II. Research Question

How the adaptation of Sri Lankan traditional design motifs in contemporary interior surface design can be identified while recognizing their adaptation perceptions of the designer?

III. Need of the Research

Sri Lanka, with its rich and diverse cultural heritage, is experiencing a notable resurgence in the appreciation of traditional elements in design. In a globalized world, where design often tends towards equality, this research offers a vital opportunity to celebrate and preserve the uniqueness of Sri Lankan culture. It bridges the past and the present, shedding light on how tradition can be a dynamic force in shaping the aesthetics and functionality of interior spaces. Moreover, the study's implications extend beyond aesthetics; it's a cultural celebration, an economic opportunity, and an ethical endeavor.

IV. Scope and Limitations

The scope of the research is to identify the adaptation and the perception of traditional motifs usage in contemporary interior surface designs. There are boundaries in the accessibility of traditional, historical and cultural resources. The study encounters the challenges of achieving a universally representative sample of perceptions of adaptation, as individual preferences in interior design of different selected locations can be highly subjective according to the interior of the building.

V. Literature Review

A. Sri Lankan traditional Motifs

The 18th century paintings or the paintings and artistic styles that describe the Sri Lankan motif related designs can be identified, there are four categorizations, Divine, Animal, Vegetable and Inorganic (Coomaraswamy, 1956).

Motifs can be identified as highly decorative art, derived from jataka paintings and images and later adapted into many other ornamental works (Coomaraswamy, 1956). In Sri Lanka, in comparison to other art styles, Central Kandyan and Southern school art styles preserve more evidences and remain in good condition (Bandaranayke, 2006). Mural paintings belonging to Central Kandyan school art style were widely developed during the monarchy of Kirthi Sri Rajasinha (1747- 1782 AD) of the Kingdom of Kandy (Karunaratne, 1999). Southern school art style was gradually coming out in temple murals belonging to Southern coastal areas of Sri Lanka during the 19th Century (Bandaranayke, 2006). The total appearance of the art looks like a decoration. Those bands were set inside the temple shrine room walls. The main colors used at the time were as white, red, yellow, black, blue, green and gold (Coomaraswamy, 1956).

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B. Introduction to Interior Design

Interior design is the art and science of enhancing interior spaces to create functional, aesthetically pleasing, and harmonious environments. It involves arranging furniture, colors, lighting, materials, and decor to reflect occupants' needs and tastes while optimizing space (Pile, 2005). Interior design blends creativity with technical expertise and evolves by drawing from historical styles and cultural heritage. Designers often study past practices and the contributions of influential individuals to inform modern approaches (Pile, 2005). In Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Buddhist arts show Indian influences, such as makara thornas and *vahalkadas*, with links to ancient Indian and Dravidian architecture. Stone and wooden thresholds, seen in temples and ruins, reflect cultural and architectural heritage, often better preserved in Sri Lanka than India (Coomaraswamy, 1956). The European motifs and arts styles were also had an impact on the Indian arts as well mixed with their own identity and had come to Sri Lanka later as ancient arts styles were mostly derived from India (Coomaraswamy, 1956).

C. Sri Lankan Interior Surface Designs Inspired by Traditional Motifs

Sri Lankan interior surface designs draw deep inspiration from traditional motifs, as seen in historical treasures like the Sigiriya frescoes, Dambulla Temple paintings, the symbolic motifs of the Temple of the Tooth, and the intricate woodcarvings at Embekke Dewalaya. These artworks showcase the country's rich heritage, blending floral patterns, mythological symbols, and meticulous detailing. The use of divine, animal, vegetable, and inorganic motifs reflects Sri Lanka's cultural identity, demonstrating their timeless beauty and enduring significance in shaping the nation's artistic legacy.

VI. Methodology

Focuses on the data collection methodology, analysis procedures, and research design. It outlines how adaptation techniques and user perceptions of traditional Sri Lankan motifs in interior surface designs informed the research framework. Through observations, discussions, and interviews, the study evaluates the effectiveness of incorporating these traditional elements into modern interior surfaces using this analytical approach.

The selection of three distinct locations for the research offers an understanding with the examples under the categorization of building type: Residential, Industrial and commercial. These three diverse contexts are used for this research to bring out the different adaptation methods and how each building differs in using traditional motifs to enhance the identity providing different experience to the outer audience.

Number 11, Mr. Geoffrey Bawa's House as an example for the residential building, Cinnamon Bentota Beach Hotel as an example for the industrial building and Spa Ceylon as an example for the commercial building in providing the adaptation of traditional motifs in their interiors. Mr. Geoffrey Bawa's House is renowned for its architectural excellence, living testament to his innovative approach to design. Cinnamon Bentota Beach Hotel offers insights into how traditional motifs are

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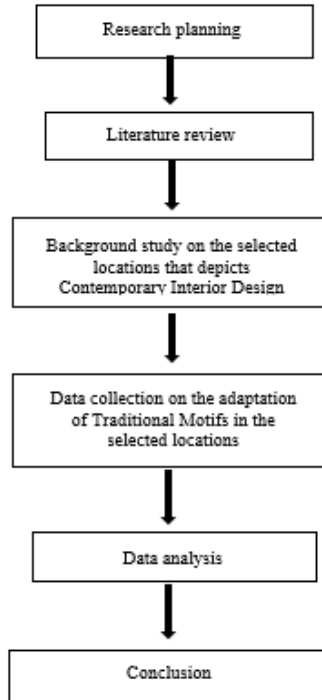
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incorporated into a contemporary hospitality setting and Spa Ceylon boutiques represent the traditional Sri Lankan identity as a global brand by using different traditional motifs and importantly their captivating interiors.

Figure 01

Research Plan



Note. Created by the author.

VII. Data Presentation and Analysis

The research explores the adaptation of traditional Sri Lankan motifs across three key contexts: residential, industrial, and commercial spaces. The findings showcase how these motifs contribute to cultural preservation and enhance the aesthetic identity of the interiors.

A. Residential context: Geoffrey Bawa's Number 11

In Number 11, Geoffrey Bawa's architectural masterpiece, traditional motifs are seamlessly integrated into various interior surfaces. The divine motifs, such as the sunburst at the entrance and symbolic representations like the moon and peacock, reflect heritage and spiritual significance. The incorporation of geometric patterns, vibrant colors, and intricate carvings in elements like doors and furniture aligns with the residence's modern aesthetic while preserving its cultural essence. For example, the sunburst radiates energy and serves as a protective charm, and the peacock carvings convey auspiciousness and harmony.

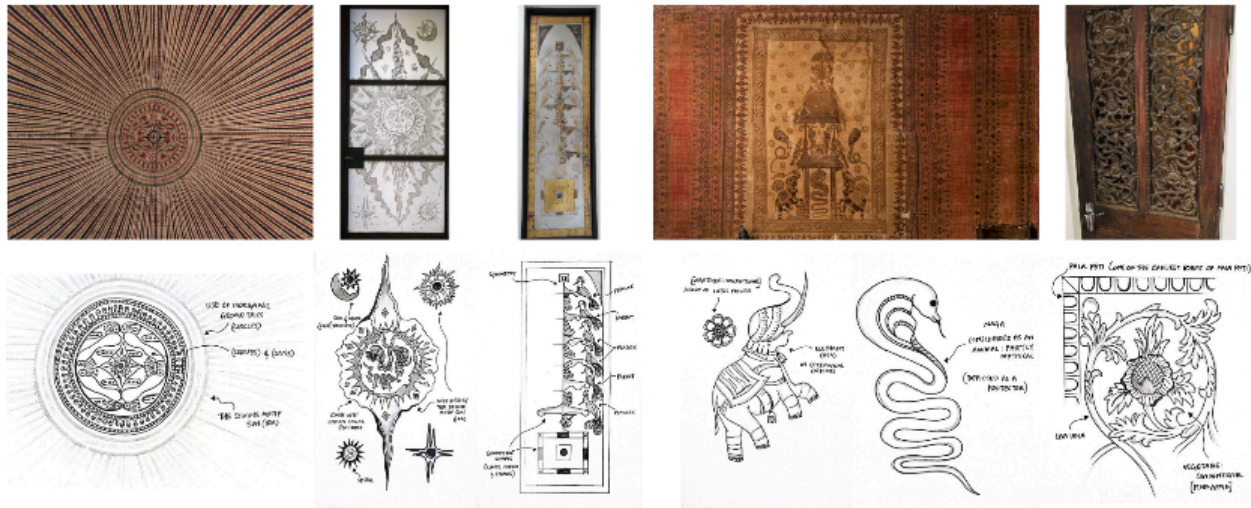
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Figure 2

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at number 11

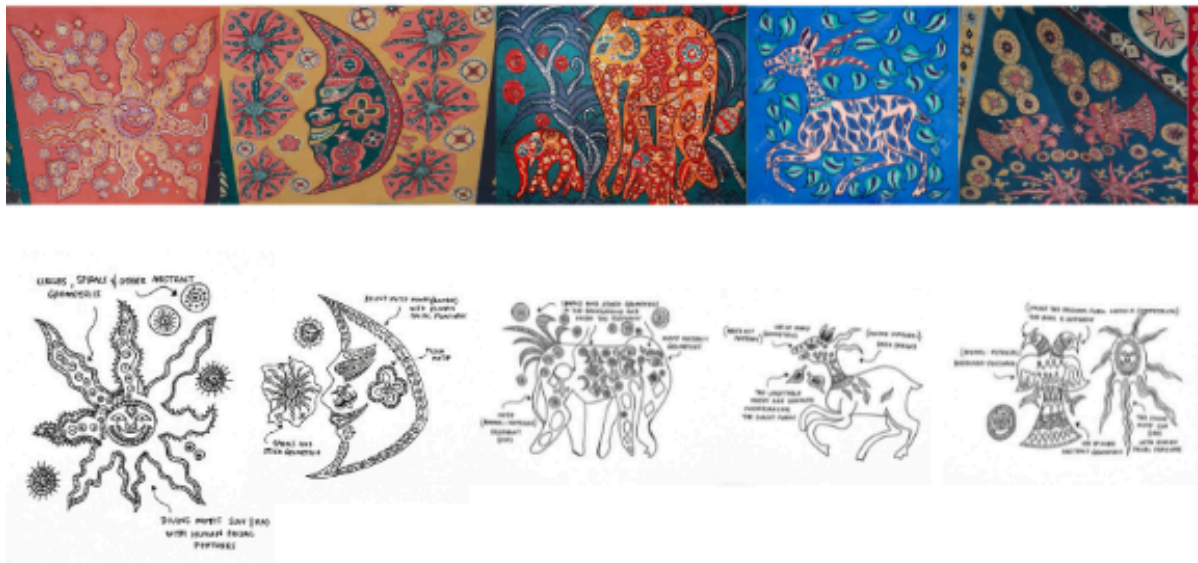


Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.

B. Industrial Context: Cinnamon Bentota Beach Hotel

Figure 3

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Cinnamon Bentota Beach



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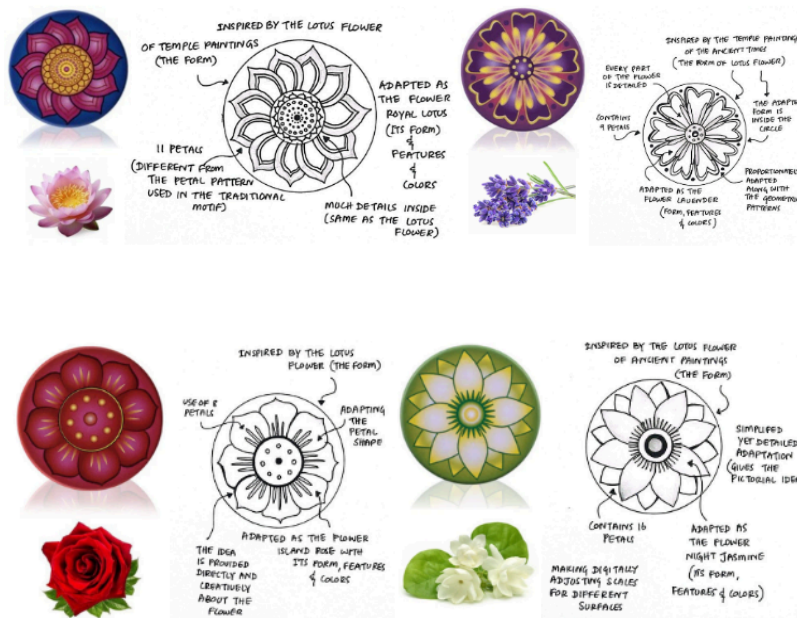
The hotel's interior surfaces blend traditional motifs with modern luxury. Features such as ceiling paintings, murals, and sculptures showcase motifs like the mythical Bherunda Pakshaya (double-headed eagle), peacocks, and floral designs. These elements, drawn from ancient Korala/royal flags and cultural symbols, exude elegance and authority. The vibrant and earthy tones used in the artworks enhance the tropical ambiance of the space, while materials like batik, brass, and copper contribute to the aesthetic depth. The peacock motifs, often symbolic of beauty and grace, are reinterpreted to create visually striking and meaningful designs within this hospitality context.



C. Commercial Context: Spa Ceylon Boutiques

Figure 4

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Spa Ceylon (Mainly used floral motifs)



Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.
(picture references - <https://lk.spaceylon.com/>)

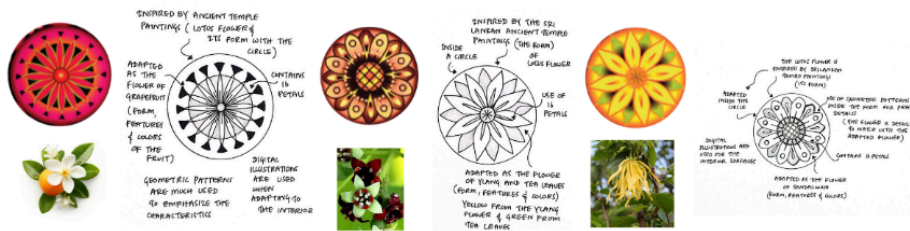
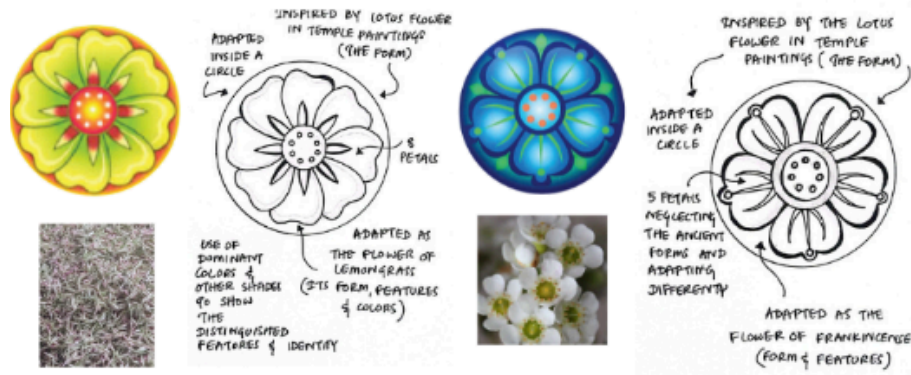
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Figure 5

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Spa Ceylon (Other commonly used floral motifs)



Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.
(picture references - <https://lk.spaceylon.com/>)

Figure 6

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Spa Ceylon (Animal/Bird motifs - Inspired by Peacock)



Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.
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Figure 7

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Spa Ceylon (Animal/Bird motifs – Inspired by Cock)



Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.
(picture references - <https://lk.spaceylon.com/>)

Figure 8

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Spa Ceylon (Animal/Bird motifs – Inspired by Parrot)



Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.
(picture references - <https://lk.spaceylon.com/>)

Figure 9

Analysis of the traditional motifs adapted on the interior surfaces at Spa Ceylon (Animal/Bird motifs – Inspired by Swan)



Note. Created by the author with detailed drawings.
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Spa Ceylon incorporates traditional Sri Lankan motifs into its interiors to create culturally immersive retail environments. Floral and bird motifs, such as peacocks, cocks, and swans, are digitally reimaged and used in wall hangings, display units, and ceilings. The use of vibrant and contrasting colors evokes a sense of liveliness and harmony. Each motif draws inspiration from temple paintings and royal insignia, reflecting themes of purity, elegance, and spirituality. The artistic techniques include digital rendering and carving, creating layered and dynamic visual compositions. These adaptations align with the brand's ethos of preserving heritage while catering to global audiences.

D. Designer Perceptions of Traditional Motifs

The designers' perceptions reflect a commitment to preserving Sri Lanka's cultural heritage while embracing modern innovation. Traditional motifs are seen as cultural treasures, with their use in Number 11 and Cinnamon Bentota Beach Hotel serving as a tribute to the country's legacy and identity. Spa Ceylon extends this approach by integrating motifs into globally appealing designs that emphasize cultural storytelling. Drawing inspiration from nature and symbolism, the designers creatively adapted flora, fauna, and geometric patterns to suit contemporary interiors while retaining their original meanings. Modern techniques such as digital rendering, stylized carvings, and bold color palettes were employed to reinterpret the motifs, ensuring their relevance in today's design contexts. Additionally, these motifs were harmoniously integrated with modern materials and architectural elements, creating unique aesthetics that balance tradition and functionality. The interiors also highlight their marketability, attracting both local and international audiences by showcasing Sri Lanka's cultural richness and offering immersive visual storytelling experiences.

Discussion and Research Findings

In Number 11, traditional Sri Lankan motifs were seamlessly adapted into the contemporary interior surfaces. This involved using these motifs in wall coverings, textiles, furniture and interior surfaces. For instance, carvings, fabrics, and wall art showcased traditional patterns fitting within the modern architectural context of the house. Artworks have reflected traditional motifs in a subtle yet impactful manner. Paintings, and textiles have incorporated symbolic elements drawn from nature, which are emblematic of Sri Lankan heritage.

Cinnamon Bentota Beach have utilized traditional motifs in its interior surface designs. This includes modern interpretations of Sri Lankan motifs in artworks, sculptures and on fabrics. The wall murals, textured artworks incorporate traditional patterns in a stylized, updated forms. Artworks have depicted traditional motifs through various mediums that subtly yet boldly reflect flora, fauna, or cultural symbols, translating them into contemporary artistic expressions.

Spa Ceylon boutiques achieved a harmonious blend of traditional motifs with modern interior surfaces. They have incorporated motifs in wall hangings, decor elements, ceilings, and in the display units, to create elegance and culturally thriving atmosphere. Artworks feature traditional motifs inspired by Sri Lankan heritage, adding an artistic and cultural dimension to the space.

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When considering the designers' perceptions on the adaptation of traditional motifs in these selected contexts, Number 11 and Cinnamon Bentota Beach represent similar outcomes as the designers are the same and they used the motifs with cultural significance and to cater elegance to the particular interior. The artworks are unique to those interiors and that fact adds more value to the interiors. Conversely, Spa Ceylon interior directly showcase the cultural essence, historical identity through their interiors adapting the motifs skillfully in the contemporary context with technological advances, creativity, their identity to develop them with their product lines to address more consumers while providing the cultural essence and identity.

Conclusion

The utilization of Sri Lankan traditional motifs in contemporary interior surface design stands as a testament to the country's rich cultural heritage and artistic legacy. These motifs, deeply rooted in historical treasures and echo the cultural significance embedded in Sri Lanka's artistry. Throughout history, the adaptation of these motifs into interior surfaces has been evident, through divine, animal, vegetable, and inorganic designs. Designers perceive these motifs as more than decorative elements; they hold cultural identity and historical value while infusing elegance and uniqueness into interior spaces. Number 11 and Cinnamon Bentota Beach Hotel, designed by the same team of visionary creators, showcase a harmonious blend of cultural significance and elegance. The specific use of motifs tailored for these interiors adds inherent value, contributing to the distinctiveness of the spaces. Conversely, Spa Ceylon's interiors epitomize the cultural essence and historical identity of Sri Lanka. The skilled adaptation showcases technological advancements and creativity. Designers focus on leveraging these motifs not only to maintain their brand identity but also to cater to a broader customer base, while preserving and promoting the cultural essence and identity of Sri Lanka.

In essence, the adaptation of Sri Lankan traditional motifs in contemporary interior surface design is a narrative of heritage preservation, artistic evolution, and cultural storytelling. It is a dynamic bridge between the past and present, showcasing the relevance and significance of these motifs in shaping Sri Lanka's distinctive cultural identity within the domain of interior design.

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