





# Period Passion

Architect **Benny Kuriakose**  
on how elements from old  
Kerala and Chettinad homes  
can be successfully incorpo-  
rated into modern dwellings



## “CHETTIAR HOUSES COMBINE TRADITIONAL AND COLONIAL ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES”

**CLASSIC STYLE:** While the roof of this Chettiar home is traditionally Indian, the parapet and spiral stairs are very colonial

The great Laurie Baker often used to say, “We should be thinking and designing as Indians, for Indians, in India. The buildings I see have nothing to do with the normal life of the Kerala individual or with the climate or materials available.” True, we have a rich and varied vernacular architecture

which is beautiful and interesting; unfortunately, there is no Indianness in most of the buildings we make. Traditional architecture is not a style, it is knowledge. Governed by vital elements such as climate and locally available materials, there was a concept and logic behind everything that was constructed in the

earlier days. Southern India had a rich and varied repertoire of vernacular architecture which was as beautiful as it was practical.

In the olden days, Kerala’s rich and famous usually lived in *nalukettus*. These homesteads had sloping roofs which came down very low and protected the walls from rain and sun, thus keeping the interiors cool. All of them had a large internal

courtyard; those with two such areas were called *ettukettus*. The number of courtyards usually depended on the size of the family. In the case of the Nair houses in which a joint

tiar community. Built between the 1880s and the 1920s, these houses bore strong colonial influences. Since many of the Chettiars worked in Burma, Singapore and Malaysia, the houses

house would be raised six feet high from the road level with steep flights of steps leading in. Every house had an imposing entrance with elaborately carved wooden doors and pan-

## “VISHRAM BY THE SEA AIMS AT INTEGRATING THE OUTDOORS WITH THE INDOORS”

RAJIV MENON



family system existed, courtyards were added as members of the family increased. The internal courtyards had a verandah on all the four sides of the courtyard.

In Tamil Nadu, the most palatial of houses were built by members of the prosperous Chet-

made ample use of Burma teak and Ceylon satinwood. Imported materials such as Italian marble, Dutch ceramic tiles, cast iron, stained glass and Bohemian chandeliers too were used in the interiors of these houses.

A typical Chettiar

els. On either side of the entrance would stand two huge raised platforms called *thinnaï*. The main door traditionally opened into a massive hall with columns made of elaborately carved wood. This used to be the men's quarters in the



V.VINOTH

**CENTRESTAGE**

As in most Kerala homes, actor Mammooty's has a verandah at the front (ABOVE); a view of the house's slanting roof (RIGHT)

old days. Courtyards were an integral feature of every Chettiar house as well. One courtyard (*onnam kettu*) would lead into another rectangular hall (*randam kettu*) for women.

Today, as our cities turn into concrete jungles, I find it heartening to have clients coming and asking

me to recreate the old houses for them. When we incorporate ancient design principles into modern day homes we achieve an amalgamation of beauty and utility and a perfect balance between style and substance.

Southern superstar Mammooty's home at

R.A. Puram in Chennai, which I designed about 14 years ago, is one such example. The brief he gave me went thus: 'I want a house built with natural materials. I do not want much concrete. I do not want large sheets of glass. I do not want marble. In short, I do not want an ex-



pensive house. My home is a very private space for me and my family and I will not bring too many people here.' The actor wanted only four bedrooms plus a room to accommodate all his electronic equipment and a projection theatre.

Since Mammothy was clear that he wanted his

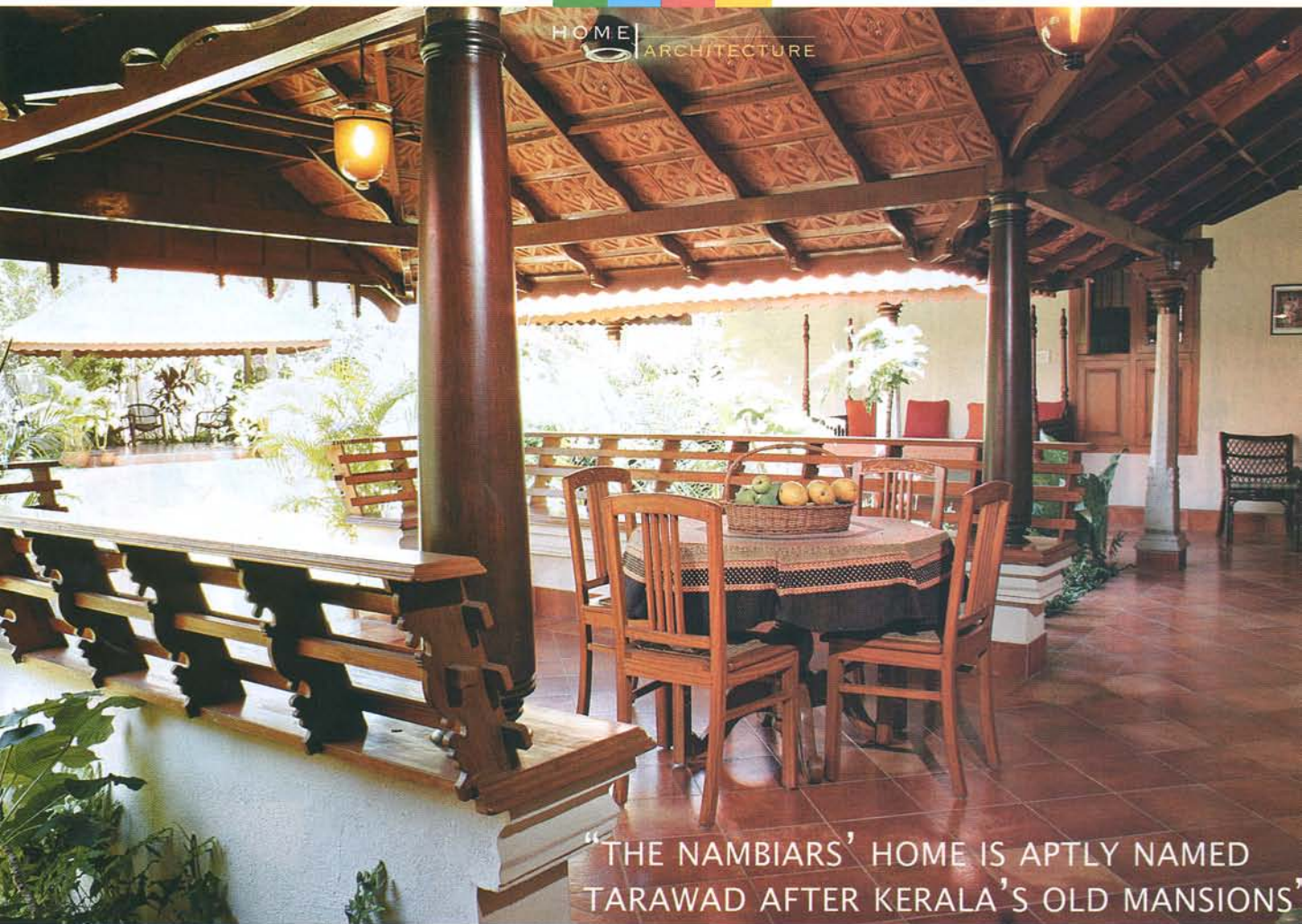
home to have a distinct Kerala flavour, I gave it a slanting roof which is very typical of homes in those parts. The 'roof ears' make for a good overhang which protects the walls from sun and rain. Arches were used instead of concrete lintels and traditional burnt clay tiles were used



## “MAMMOOTHY WANTED A HOME ENTRENCHED IN HIS ROOTS”

for the flooring. As in most Kerala homes, the house has a front verandah and a side verandah. With the master bedroom and the children's bedrooms being at two opposite ends with the family room in between, the homestead is quite spread out. The kitchen faces east and lets

in the morning sun. A narrow staircase leads up from the office to the first floor home theatre room. The idea here is that when Mammothy takes producers and directors to view films on the large screen in the projection room, it will not affect the privacy of the family.



"THE NAMBIARS' HOME IS APTLY NAMED TARAWAD AFTER KERALA'S OLD MANSIONS"

V.VINOTH



**VERANDAH VISTA**  
The built-in seats and Calicut columns add to the charm of the Nambiar home (FAR ABOVE); a traditional courtyard (ABOVE)

Just as Mammoorthy wanted an unpretentious home with a Kerala flavour, so did another Chennai client for his beach home. She was so focused on authenticity, we brought in carpenters from Kerala to construct the thatched roof. Located on Chennai's East Coast Road over a half-acre plot and aptly called Vishram by the Sea, this home aims at integrating the outdoors with the indoors. Because of the stupendous view, I

decided to focus more on the verandahs and public areas and deliberately kept the bedrooms small as in the old Kerala homes. The verandahs here are so large that one can easily put a bed and a writing table on them, apart of course from armchairs and recliners. In this house, I have divided the common areas into smaller spaces. Each space has a character all its own; so each person can have a favourite corner in the house. My

favourite place in this house are the rough granite steps on the pond where one can spend hours gazing at the fish in the water and watch the reflection of the trees all around.

Inside, we have used a lot of traditional architectural accents. The client possessed some windows and rafters from an old building she owned in Chettinad and we decided to instal them here. The doors came from another old home that was being

pulled down in the city to make way for an office complex. The client also had two sets of Chettinad pillars—one made of timber, the other of stone. I decided to use the stone set, because the timber pillars were far too decorative and would not have gone with the rustic style of the house.

Not too far away from Vishram by the Sea is the home of businessman Vijaykumar Nambiar and his wife Aruna, at Akkarai. A

*padipurra* or gatehouse, a typical Kerala structure, stands at the entrance to the house. Appropriately named Tarawad (after the ancestral mansions of Kerala), the sprawling, 5,200-sq-ft bungalow is set on a quarter-acre plot, with the beach well within sight. The gable roof is heavily patterned with timber fretwork. The built-in seating on the entrance verandah adds to its quaint charm as do the Chettinad stone pillars.

**OLD WORLD CHARM**  
Chettinad pillars combined with period furniture, brass diyas and urlis give the Nambiar's living room a thorough dose of tradition.

**“NAMBIAR’S ATRIUM-LIKE LIVING ROOM HARKS BACK TO THE NALUKETTU PRINCIPLE”**

V.VINOTH





## “THE BEDROOMS IN YAMUNA’S HOME HAVE BEEN DELIBERATELY KEPT SMALL AND COSY”

The combination of wood, stone and tiles add a touch of authenticity and old world piety to the otherwise modern setting.

The *nadumittam* or

atrium, which doubles as a living room, is designed with elements of the *nalukettu* principle. The wooden pillars and a temple door, both from Chettinad, com-

bined with brass diyas and urlis infuse the space with a sense of tradition. Special attention has been given to natural light and ventilation, and French doors and window let in oodles of light, giving the house a very airy and spacious feeling.

Another light and airy home is that of the theatre director N.S. Yamuna, located at Injambakkam also on East Coast Road. Called The Pyramid because of its wide-angled, 40-ft-high pointed roof, each of the house’s two bedrooms has a courtyard attached with a bathing area open to the sky. As traditional courtyards were meant to, these encourage laid back activities like oil massages, sun bathing and relaxing in recliners.

The small sunken area in the centre makes for an intimate space. Two pillars and a wall support the mezzanine that serves as a library and continues up to the pyramidal “look-out” which is glass-enclosed. The floors of these two central spaces are made of wood, like the spiral staircase leading up from the ground as well as the ladder going up from the library.



V.VINOTH

**“THE DOUBLE HEIGHT CEILING AND WINDOWS GIVE THE HOME A LIGHTNESS OF BEING”**

The Mangalore tiled roof is in two tiers and resembles the Kerala traditional roof structure. The extending overhangs protect the exposed brick walls. The flooring in the rooms has been created

with custom-made Athangudi tiles, the verandahs with black Cuddapah while courtyards are lined with terracotta tiles. Here too, the doors and windows have been salvaged from a village home.

**PYRAMID POWER:**  
The glass-enclosed pyramidal 'lookout' of Yamuna's home (BELOW); the spiral stairs are the focal point of the living room (LEFT)



V. VINOTH

The architectural scene has changed rapidly in the last two decades. We have made a start by trying to recreate architecture that suits the local environment, climate and people. How the new architects take up the challenge is to be seen in the next decade.