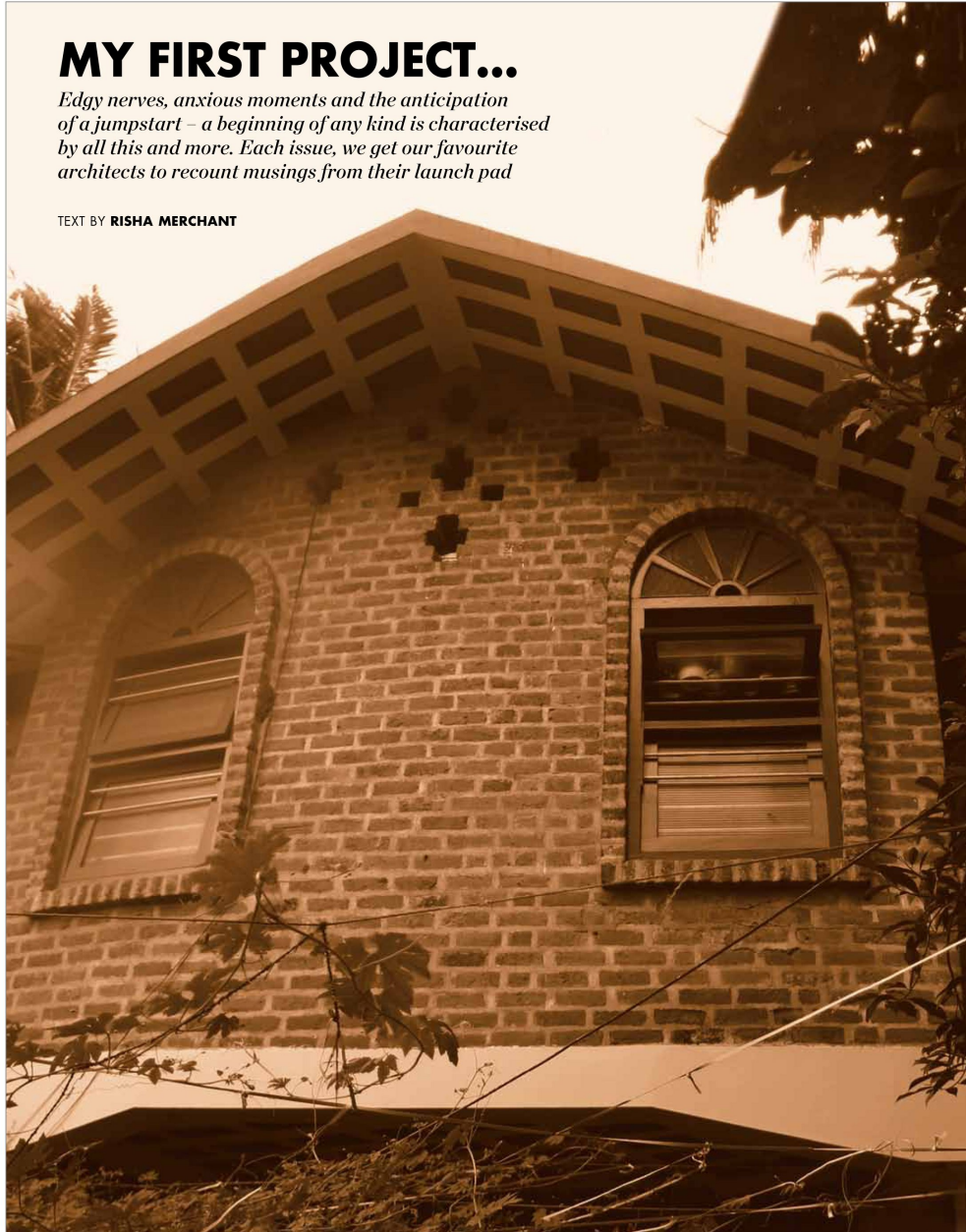


MY FIRST PROJECT...

Edgy nerves, anxious moments and the anticipation of a jumpstart – a beginning of any kind is characterised by all this and more. Each issue, we get our favourite architects to recount musings from their launch pad

TEXT BY **RISHA MERCHANT**



“Since the plot was not large enough to build a straight lined house, we had to construct it in an arched shape”



BENNY KURIAKOSE

The Chennai based architect created his foundation under the tutelage of legendary creative Laurie Baker. He specialises in cost effective housing and architectural conservation of projects like DakshinaChitra in Chennai, and Muziris Heritage Project in Kerala

Above The river facing bungalow was named Arc because of its curved structure. Left Natural materials like country bricks and wood were placed together using Laurie’s design techniques to create the basic vocabulary of the space. Website: www.benny.in

Architecture was never a natural choice for Benny. “My dream was to be a cinematographer,” states the creative. Though he always took a liking towards photography, his father’s concerns about his future prospects orchestrated this career shift. With no formal background in the subject, he earned a degree in civil engineering in 1984. And then there was a twist of fate. While working on his final thesis at Vattiyoor kavu IAS Colony in Trivandrum, he met Laurie Baker who was visiting the same site. After that meeting, Benny’s enthusiasm to simply learn from Laurie made him one of the privileged few to become the latter’s lifelong protegee. He was later awarded the Charles Wallace India Trust Award that took him to York University in 1987 to pursue MA in Conservation Studies.

The visionary strictly followed the principles laid down by his guru, who was also fondly known as “daddy” by his colleagues and workers. The Brit-born Indian architect had brought in low-cost housing to Kerala, a concept which was much ahead of its time then. His style included economical structures with exposed walls, filler slabs, arches and the invention of the brick bonding technique. His design ethic gained momentum in the ‘70s and Benny became one of the few architects to propagate it. “In 1985 I joined COSTFORD (Centre of Science and Technology For Rural Development) in Thrissur as the joint director and constructed the first three buildings designed by Laurie.”

During that time, the multi talented architect got his first independent project – a three

bedroom family home in Kottayam, owned by a college lecturer couple John and Susan and their two children. This 1,750 sq ft structure offers enviable views of the river; however, “the most important factor was that the rooms including the kitchen overlooked it,” adds Benny. “Since the plot was not large enough to build a straight lined house, we had to construct it in an arched shape. I was also influenced by my mentor’s designs as he used different shapes for every creation.”

Putting his learnings into practice, the creative introduced the uncommonly used, exposed brickwork and pointing technique – he had to intensely teach and train his masons. The interiors too were uncompromisingly direct, devoid of superficial comforts or flashy details. “Using Laurie’s style of architecture, the cost was also brought down. The house was left unplastered inside out; lintels were replaced by arches; filler slabs were used for the roofs and burnt clay tiles for the ground,” he explains. As of today, the bungalow has undergone only a few modifications. “Since the plot is adjacent to the river, a rise in the water level caused dampness to the clay surface. Hence the flooring in the base level bedroom was changed to ceramic tiles.”

From Benny’s wide range of endeavours, this project will always be special. When asked about a vivid memory while working on this abode, his response was as modest as his work ethic: “When it came to the professional fees, I did not know what to charge since there was no formal agreement. Finally, John gave me a blank cheque and asked me to write the amount!” he signs off. ♦