

Benny Kuriakose Architect



Benny Kuriakose, Architect

In 1993, he started practicing architecture again. 1994 was a landmark year - following the Latur earthquake, Malayalam Manorama commissioned him to design the rebuilding of Banegaon village. And in 1996, he shifted base to Chennai. A member on the Task Force on Urban Development for the 8th and 9th Five Year Plans, State Planning Board, and Government of Kerala, he has also served as a member on the Government of Kerala's Expert Committee for

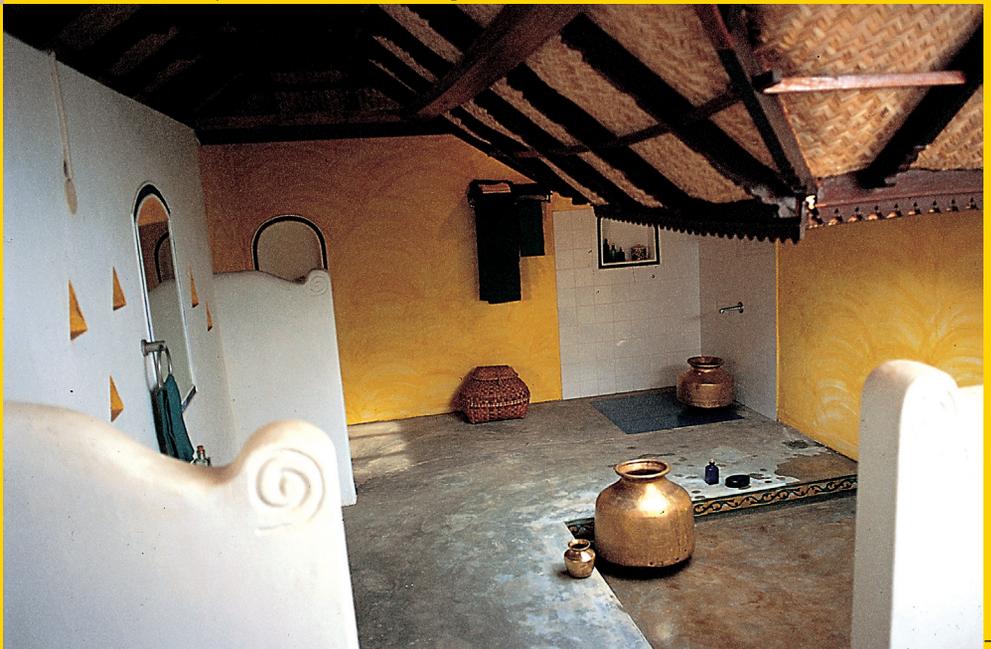
examining the feasibility of adopting low-cost technology in the construction of school buildings. Kuriakose shares his design sensibilities and vision with CW...

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY: Architecture is not like a painting, it has certain utilitarian aspects. We are creating buildings for the people using them, and their views, likes and dislikes are very important. I do not want to impose my ideas on the buildings I design. I design each building according to each client's needs, and that is why my buildings are different. Even if they are not interested, I try my best to involve them. I want to do nice buildings that people like to use; I want to give importance to their physical and psychological needs. As each client is different, the details of

each house will also be different.

MY TECHNIQUES: I do not concentrate on elevation in the beginning. I start working on the elevation only once the plan is more or less finalised. The elevation should not be the main criterion - you should give equal importance to utility and convenience. Otherwise it's like marrying a beautiful wife whose character is not good! Also, you can improve thermal performance of buildings by using overhangs, verandas, courtyards, or even planting trees around them. Many of these techniques are used in traditional buildings. I use lot of sloping roofs and I think the roof can be used as an important element of a building. In many modern buildings, you do not see the roof at all.

This weekend house - Vishram on the Sea - won Benny the Inside Outside Designer of the Year Award in 2001.



He calls himself a 'green architect' - rightly so. Chennai-based architect Benny Kuriakose started his career in 1984 under the tutelage of the renowned Laurie Baker. A Charles Wallace India Trust Award in 1986 took him to the University of York, UK, for his MA in Conservation Studies. On his return, he worked in Kerala till 1991, doing projects on cost-effective techniques, even returning to his village to design furniture!

MATERIAL SELECTION: I try and use a lot of natural materials that are sustainable and can be recycled. It is not the initial cost alone that matters but lifecycle costs and the impact on the environment. This does not mean that I do not use concrete or steel. I use aluminium very rarely though. It is very energy consuming. A lot of materials are now available in the market. I do use imported materials for clients who can afford it but how far these will affect small-scale industries and traditional crafts related with buildings is to be seen. Many materials we import are not necessary. I hope the import of building materials and products helps Indian industry to improve its own products.

TIMBER: I use a lot of timber. I use

A cottage at the resort.



The cost effective Backwater Ripples Resort in Kumarakom.

recycled timber where I can get access to it. Also, I use timbers that are not normally used for building construction, such as palm timber and lesser known species. If you use recycled timber and lesser known species, you can lower costs substantially. Buildings with timber roofs are generally quite comfortable. Also, timber can be recycled and renewed.

CEMENT AND LIME: Cement has its share of advantages, which are well known, and disadvantages, which are less known. It is unnecessarily strong for some uses and develops shrinkage cracks



A residence in Tarawad.

and allows penetration of moisture. In many climatic conditions, it does not prove to be very durable as we earlier assumed, and is easily attacked by sulphates. On the other hand, lime does not suffer from many of these defects. It is time we start using lime as a combination mortar.

STEEL: I use steel trusses for some of my buildings, including houses, and put Mangalore tiles on top of the steel truss. It can be economical in some cases. Although steel is highly energy-consuming, I use it because it can be recycled. Also, using hollow steel box sections, you can get the look of a timber rafter.

CONSTRUCTION CHEMICALS: The quality of workmanship has come down drastically in the past two decades. Waterproofing toilets or RCC roofs was not at all common when I started my practice 20 years ago. Now, it has become the order of the day. You can use construction chemicals wherever it is absolutely necessary. If we use them as a

short cut to good workmanship and practice, I think we are on the wrong path. Some chemicals, such as epoxy, are really useful but should be used carefully, and minimally.

COMPUTER SOFTWARE: I use AutoCAD in my office; I think it has many advantages over manual drafting. I personally use CAD and if I draft the schemes myself, it definitely improves the quality of the final product, compared with what my draftsman does. When you do the CAD drafting yourself, there are many opportunities for you to improve upon the design, although you would have probably worked out many of the details beforehand anyway.

PRESTIGIOUS PROJECTS: The Backwater Ripples Resort in Kumarakom, the public buildings in Dakshinachitra, the Institute of Palliative Medicine in Calicut and the design of two earthquake rehabilitation villages after the Latur and Kutch earthquakes are all cost-effective and appropriate to the environment, in terms

of climate, landscape, materials, techniques and idiom. Even the houses I have designed as part of an ambitious housing reconstruction programme for tsunami victims in the villages of Tarangambadi and Chinnankudi are dear to my heart - the project entails the construction of 2,000 houses in 2,000 designs. My other conservation projects include St. George School in Chennai and the Senate House in Madras University, as a consultant on INTACH projects. For Vishram on the Sea, I won the Inside Outside Designer of the Year Award in 2001.

WORDS OF CAUTION: We forget about our own traditions. We know that modern architecture is not good in some respects and there are so many things which we can learn from traditional architecture. The biggest challenge we face now is to attain good quality in construction. The quality of workmanship has declined over the years and it is affecting the durability of our buildings.

CW

The reception porch and car park, again at Backwater Ripples Resort.

