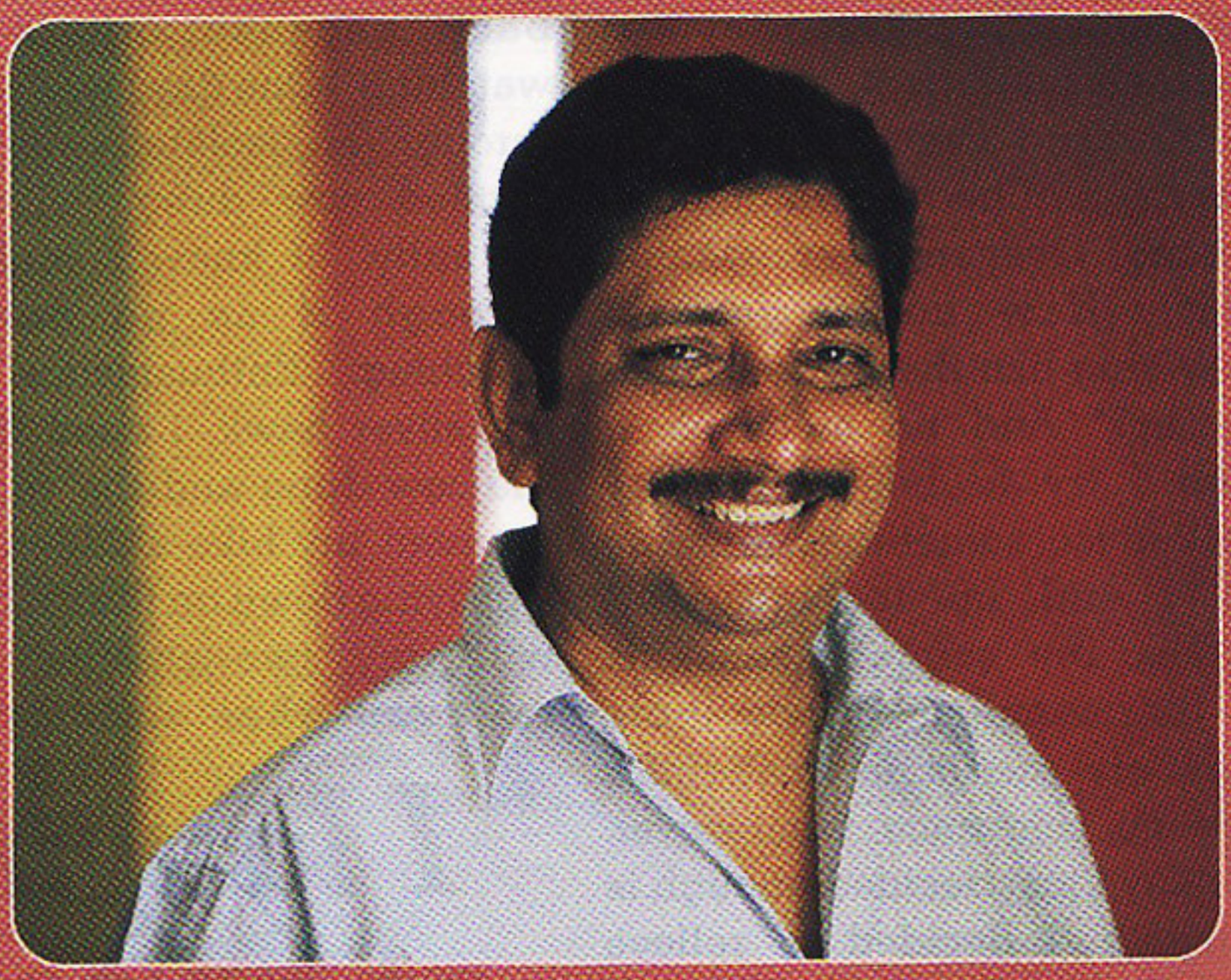
The man with 'no' PRETENCE



BENNY KURIAKOSE

His Dakshinchitra is a landmark. So many celebrities live in houses designed by him. He is the man behind the rehabilitation homes of the victims of earthquakes in Gujarat and tsunami in Tamil Nadu. This national level award-winning architect is Benny Kuriakose, primarily a wonderful human being and of course a renowned architect.

A S Gopal

Buildings are no more mere buildings. They are becoming landmarks. Modern or traditional, behind every building there is an intelligence, and we call that intelligence an architect. An architect is one who gives life to his thoughts and converts them into buildings. He gives life to buildings in the ways he blends God's materials (nature) with man's materials (building materials). "No matter how many times you visit the same building, the feel of that place should still be new and fresh," says **Benny Kuriakose**.

For a person of such stature, he never throws his weight around. I couldn't resist but enquire about his simplicity. Benny Kuriakose said with a smile, "I don't present myself in a fashionable way. I learnt from Laurie Baker, who has been my Guru, to be truthful and sincere, not only in architecture but also in life. The buildings should not pretend, behind a nice facade there could be a solid wall, the elevation may cover up the building. If I use stone or brick I leave them exposed. The temple should look like a temple, a school like a school and a house like a house. I might have lost some projects because of lack of fancy presentation, but I don't want to do them; rather I can't do them. I consider that those projects don't deserve me. I never thought I would reach where I have reached. Everything is a bonus. I like being this way. My buildings and I, we don't pretend."

Benny was under the direct tutelage of Laurie Baker for about seven years, but worked with him only for a year. He said of his experience with him, "I wanted to be a cinematographer and to collect a degree I studied civil engineering. It was an accidental meeting with him that changed my path. My learning was more like one in a *Gurukul*. I didn't learn the conventional way. He understood me and polished me. Creativity needs no formal education. In fact, many of the best architects in the world have not had formal education. Architects can't be made from a classroom. I am not saying academic knowledge is not important, but creativity cannot depend on it totally."

Benny believes that in architecture the concept is more important than the elevation. Explaining it he said, "Just because a woman is beautiful, you can't marry her. Many beautiful women don't live a happy life. Elevation is important, but not the only factor.

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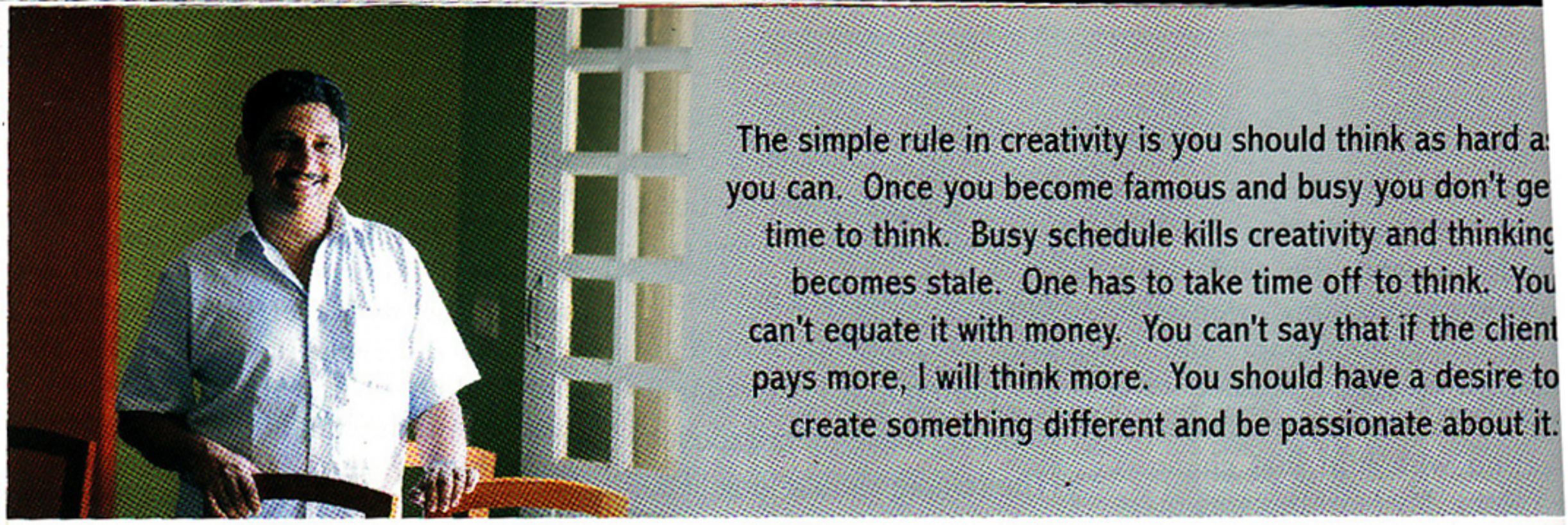
The concept is very important. Any building is more a feeling. One should feel to experience the spaces again and again. For example, a school should help to enlarge the dreams of the child. It is not only in addressing the physical needs which can be easily satisfied, but also in taking care of the psychological needs that differentiates one building from another."

The architect has to strike a balance between the client's needs and his design, from knowing where to be rigid and where to be flexible to bring out a great building. Explaining the balance he said, "The first priority is to satisfy the needs of the client. He will be able to give the physical needs, but the architect has to understand the client and thereby the psychological needs and design accordingly. The rooms may be of same size, but design would differ. All my buildings are different. No style is followed, as style is superfluous. The success of a building depends on the participation of the client and the willingness of the architect to assist him. The client builds only one house in a lifetime. The architect should assist the client to make the right decisions by explaining the pros and cons."

Being an architect means one should be able to sustain freshness of ideas till the end, to leave out the past and embark on the future. Expressing his views on what he feels and does to sustain these qualities he said,



"The simple rule in creativity is you should think as hard as you can. When I start a project, I tell myself that this will be my best project and it is always part of me whether I am eating, sleeping, walking. Once you become famous and busy you don't get time to think. Ideas don't come all of a sudden. Busy schedule kills creativity and thinking becomes stale. One has to take time off to think. You can't equate it with money. You can't say that if the client pays more, I will think more. You should have a desire to create something different and be passionate about it."

Creativity being such a full-time mental occupation, is it possible to be restful and peaceful? In response, Benny said, "I am always peaceful, not stressed. I enjoy what I am doing and it is important to be satisfied. As long as I am happy, it's fine with me. Recognitions, awards, and money are not my focus. I think I can do more."

Mostly there seem to be compromises in the final output from what was conceived in paper. Why? "Architecture is to be experienced. It can never be conveyed through mere photos and drawings. The architect should think in three-dimension and bring that out in two-dimensional drawings. The plan is important; the elevation automatically follows."

When asked to narrate his working experience on his award-winning projects he said, "I see all projects the same way. I don't attach much importance to awards and not necessarily my award-winning projects are my best projects. A project, which is very close to me is the hospital block which we designed for the terminally ill cancer patients at Calicut. It is a place where those patients would spend their last days. I got together the entire team, including the doctors and the nurses, and understood that everyone would like to die in their home, rather than in a hospital. So th entire focus went into making the hospital look an feel like a home. Most of the time, the patient would be lying on the bed and hence the ceilin should be interesting. From nature to veranda t chirping birds to coloured walls - spaces were designed to make it look like home. A few months after completion when I visited the hospital and enquired with one of the patients he said that being in that block makes him feel that half his disease had gone. What could be more fulfilling than that?"

Speaking on the importance of teamwork, Benny said, "Talent alone can't make one successful. One needs a team. I am aware that they should never aspire to be like me, but they have to become what they are capable of. I feel a drive in creating young people. Today I look at my success not based on my projects, but based on how many leaders I can create. The system of my organisation is that either you will fit in or drop out."

Benny, speaking on what drives him, said, "I am excited about my work. It is about passion. Money is not the driving force, nevertheless it is important to live comfortably. I have seen so many who'd made money at the peak of their career and at the end of their innings felt unhappy and empty and became philanthropic. I don't want to end up like that and hence I strike a balance."

After acquiring a master's degree from the UK and with over 26 years experience in designing, Benny is now pursuing his Ph.D. at the IIT, Madras. He believes that in the next ten years reverse migration will happen, where people will move from cities to rural areas in India and he wants to focus on arriving at an Indian solution in this context and he feels that will be his contribution to the society.