

ENCHANTING PAST

A brief chat with famed architect Benny Kuriakose who has been bringing the past back to the present through architecture

Words by Vaibhav Photographs by Benny Kuriakose



No place is remembered for its natural beauty alone, but rather by the way it has preserved its past. Strident modernism has been marching in everywhere, with graceful homes of yesteryears being replaced by modern ones.

Although modern amenities, facilities and technologies have taken over our lives, there is an increasing awareness about heritage. An example of this is seen in the growing popularity of heritage hotels as opposed to five star hotels, and this is what charms leading architect Benny Kuriakose, more popularly known as BK, who received the basic lessons in architecture under the tutelage of Laurie Baker, a British-born Indian architect who pioneered vernacular sustainable eco-friendly

green architecture in India with brick mud and other local materials. BK's strict adherence to the universal principles of architecture can be seen in the range of his work: individual homes, resorts and institutional projects, in the Dakshinachitra project in Chennai, in the rehabilitation of disaster sites at Nagapattinam, Bhuj or Lattur and in the Heritage Project at Muziris in Kerala.

How do you include the charm of the past while working on your projects?

You need to take inspiration from somewhere. I have been mostly influenced by our own history and architecture. I do not see our traditional architecture as another style, but more like a depository of knowledge. But the society has undergone many changes, technology has undergone many changes; so it is

for us to look at these and then derive at a different kind of vocabulary in architecture.

What elements, places, people and structures have inspired and influenced you most?

Courtyards, verandahs, and roofs are some of the elements which I use very expressively in the design of buildings. Kerala where I grew up and Tamil Nadu where I have spent the last 20 years of my life have influenced me. I like the works of architects such as Laurie Baker, Geoffrey Bawa, and Le Corbusier. For me, there is only good architecture and bad architecture, and both traditional and modern architecture have influenced me.

Do consider the increase of heritage in architecture today as a trend or awareness?



vernacular architecture.

Tell us about your Muziris Heritage Project.

The concept of the Muziris Heritage Project is very unique. It is an alternate approach to heritage management, and the biggest challenge was to develop the concept which suits the local context. Muziris Heritage Project is planned as a conservation project. In one sentence, when the project is completed, it will be a walk through 3,000 years of Kerala history. It is very special since this is the place where Jews, Arabs, Greeks, Portuguese, Dutch and the British came. Three religions came to India through this port namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Muziris Project has many dimensions. It is an educational project, developmental project and a model for sustainable tourism. Conservation of historic buildings are being done as part of this project. Different museums are already open to the public. There is infrastructure improvement such as the construction of new boat jetties. Archaeological excavations are being carried out in Pattanam and Kottappuram Fort as well. Lot of academic research is also taking place simultaneously.

I will say that awareness has increased over the years and as a whole it is heading towards a positive direction. Twenty five years ago, demolition of historic buildings was not even news, but now people talk about the conservation of historic buildings. Perhaps the destruction of our built heritage and its loss have made people more aware about heritage values. Also what replaced them, would also have made people more aware of what they were losing out on. When people take pride in heritage, our historic buildings will be safe.

What's special about vernacular architecture?

We have a lot to learn from our own architecture. It teaches one on how to build according to the climate and use local materials and techniques which are 100 percent our own. I

would always vouch for our vernacular architecture to give some of the best examples of sustainable or green architecture. It is for us to reinterpret the vernacular architecture and make use of them in contemporary buildings. Only then can we claim to have an architectural identity of our own. If we copy from the west, then the architectural landscape that we have will not be any different, or unique.

How are factors such as energy conservation, eco-friendliness planned in your designs?

Lot of my projects are based on conservation. They are eco-friendly and energy-conserving because they use less resources and energy. Even for my recent work I use lot of natural materials and natural methods of building, also suitable for the climate, all using lessons I have learned from