



Benny Kuriakose

Benny Kuriakose began his career under the tutelage of Laurie Baker in 1984. He completed his MA in Conservation Studies at the University of York in 1986, as a Charles Wallace India Trust scholar. His work in Kerala was focused on cost effective technique and he was commissioned by Malaya Manorama to design the rebuilding of Banegaon Village that was devastated by the earthquake in Latur in 1994. Benny's work focuses on conservation, incorporation and promotion of traditional crafts and sustainable development. Some of his conservation projects include St George School Chennai, Gables Bunaglow Coonoor, reports on Srirangapatanam, Pudducherry and Anegundi Palace and the Senate house of Madaras University. Some of his architectural works include design of tsunami-affected villages of Chinnagundi and Tarangmbadi in Nagapattinam District, and the layout of village of Chapredi for the Kutch earthquake rehabilitation project. He has been a visiting faculty at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, Indian Institute of Technology and various other architectural schools. He has also been a member of the Task Force on Urban Development for the 9th Five Year Plans State Planning Board and Government of Kerala.

THE CHANDRAMANDALA AND THE CHANDRAMANDAPA

Plot Area	:	40 36 Sq.m.
Built up Area	:	155.3 Sq.m. (Chandramandapa)
		299.4 Sq.m. (Chandramandala)
Architects	:	Vedika Creates the Built Environment
Year of Completion	:	2008
Cost	:	INR 50 lakh

The project was to design the spaces at #1 Elliots Beach Road, Besant Nagar, Chennai where the legendary dancer-choreographer Chandralekha lived, danced and created her memorable and path-breaking works in dance drama. The spaces were the new Kalari performance area, the redesign of the open air theatre, her residence, and a new library. The renovation of the residence and the library are yet to happen.

The main challenge was to accommodate the requirements in a site without affecting the vocabulary of the space. For example the design has evolved in such a way that none of the existing trees in the site have been disturbed. What is the breathtaking new addition is the space for practice and performance of the martial art of Kalari, which formed an integral part of Chandralekha's dance concepts and choreography.



CHANDRAMANDAPA

This space can be rightfully termed a “timeless” one. The Chandramandapa is the ancient *Kuzhi Kalari* of Kerala, transformed into a concept of twenty-first century Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

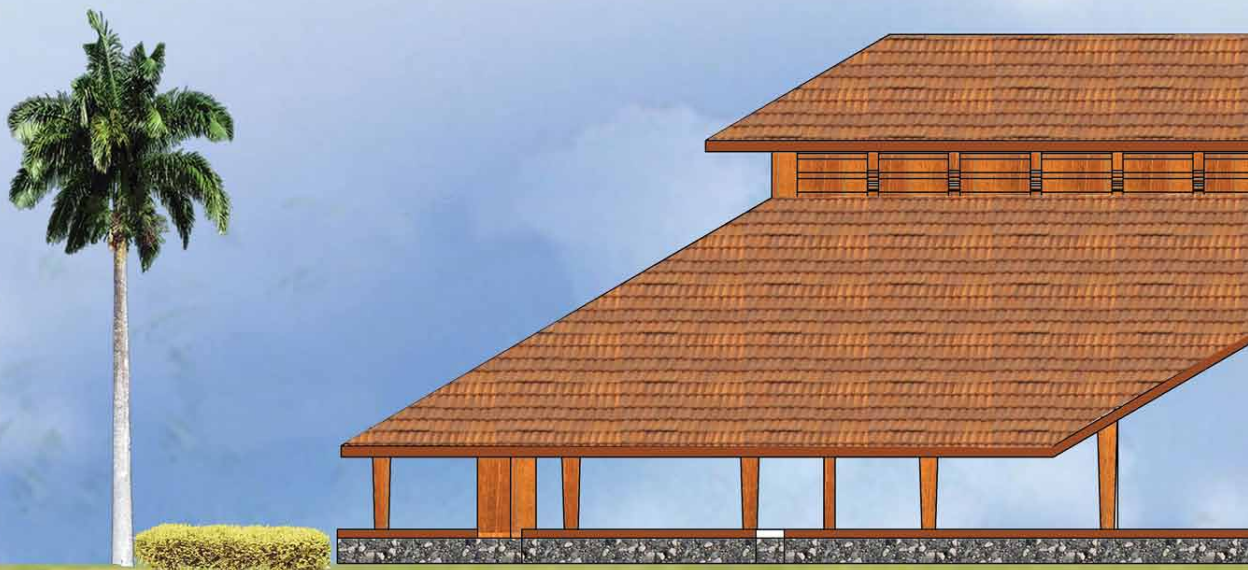
Kalaripayattu, which traces its origin in Kerala needs no introduction, as it has come to be recognized as the most ancient form of martial art, and also the mother of all martial arts of the world today. Chandralekha saluted this body of knowledge and this art form and drew inspiration from here, for her electrifying creations like ‘Sri’, ‘Raga’, ‘Sharira’ and other iconoclastic dances, that have made her unforgettable the world over.

DESIGN CONCEPT

The traditional ‘Kalari’ is a temple – a temple of learning, of art, of religious worship – a temple for the worship of many icons, but with a cult and ritual of its own. This *kalari*, in the spaces dedicated to Chandralekha, pays homage to its ancient heritage, and then transports itself into the present and future, as a space that will always worship the creation of artistic movement.

DESIGN OF MASS AND VOLUME

Its basic structural design starts in the traditional precepts. It is a ‘*kuzhi*’ or pit, dug out of the sand, to a depth of four feet from ground level. By its dimensions of 42 feet by 21 feet





and rising to an overall height of 21 feet, it adheres to the ancient *Kalari*. Then, it breaks from the traditional and moves to affording the requirements of a variety of contemporary performance artists, as well as *Kalari* exponents of today.

The raised roof allows for a greater air flow and to take advantage of being on the seaside, to compensate for the absence of air conditioning, by providing natural coolness that is vital to all performers. According to tradition, this *Kalari* adheres to the concept of 'green' and sustainability in its use of timber, stone, and tiles. It faces East. And in its proportions and in the simplicity of its decor on the outside and on the inside, it retains the features of the classic.

DESIGN OF LANDSCAPE

The ancient *kalaris* were secluded from onlookers, because the master would surely want to pass on the secrets of the art, in the greatest of privacy. However,



▲ *Series of stone steps rising in comfortable levels provide for the seating inside the 'kalari'*





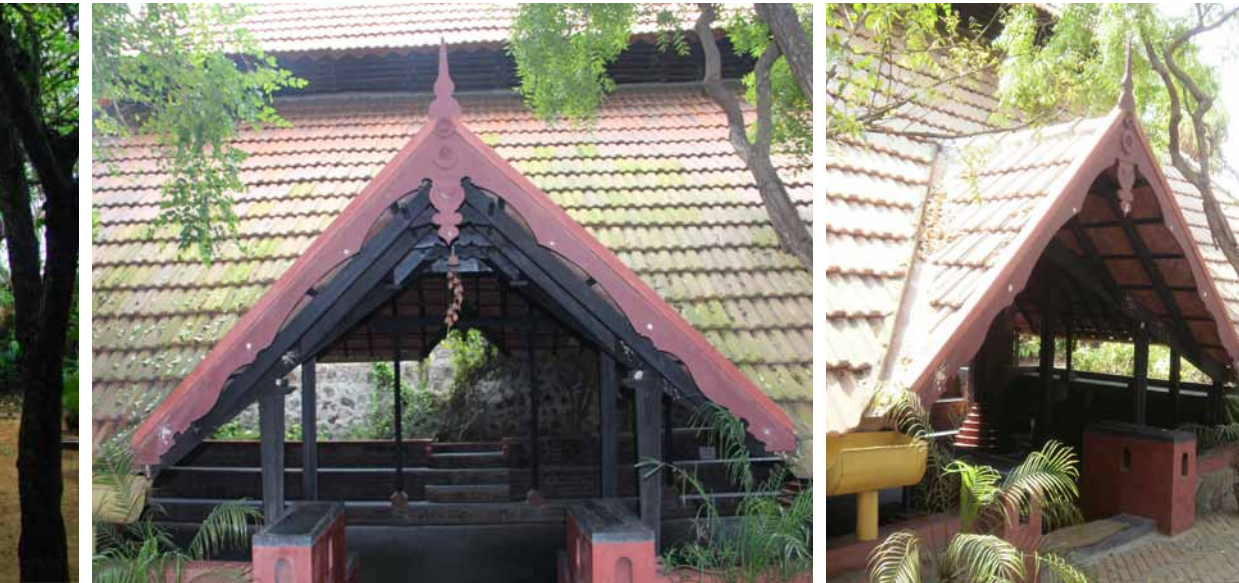
▲ *Kalari adheres to the concept of green and sustainability in its use of timber, stone and tiles*



▲ *Raised roof allows for greater air flow*

today, the Chandramandapa is a much sort after public space, offering an ancient ambience with modern facilities. Its seating is a series of stone steps, rising in comfortable levels, from the floor to a little above ground level. When the need arises, the pillars and rafters lend themselves to carrying contemporary lighting and acoustic, electronic equipment. It serves as an amphitheatre or “theatre-in-the-round”, which is both an ancient and modern form of performing space. In addition, the design skirted the trees in the compound and they did not need to be cut down. Hence, they still add to the aesthetics of the surroundings of the Chandramandapa and its climate within.

One of the features different to the traditional *Kalari* is that it is paved with stone, whereas the ancients preserved the mud or sand surfaces, to soften



the fall of the warriors and apprentices. Another is the roof. Traditionally, it was an open pit. Although this *Kalari* has a roof, it has been lifted slightly for better cross ventilation, taking care to see that the privacy of the pit is preserved.

CHANDRAMANDALA

The original theatre, which has been updated, is now named “Chandramandala”. The changes are hardly perceptible, as they have been subtly worked into the original 25-year old structure. The height has been raised, the stage enlarged and the green rooms with these facilities have been added. What once served as mainly rehearsal and work-in-progress space is now transformed into a contemporary, open-air theatre for small audiences.

In time, the Chandramandala and the Chandramandapa will become iconoclastic too, and are bound to be the forerunners of outstanding performance spaces.