



Benny Kuriakose is an architect with a difference. Trained under illustrious architect Laurie Baker, he has earned acclaim for his rehabilitation architecture. He created a model of cost-effective dwelling units for the victims of earthquake in Latur (India) in 1994 as well as Tsunami victims in 2004. Ever since, Benny has been invited by School of Planning and Architecture, Indian Institute of Technology and other premier institutes to share his philosophy of architecture for the common people. He provides consultancy to the United Nations Development Programme as well. He talked to **Society and Environment** on several issues revolving around architecture. Excerpts from a candid conversation with Benny:

When the world swears by skyscrapers and trade towers, how do you view the need for ecologically sustainable building?

Now architecture has become a selling point. If a particular building is designed by an architect, then it may fetch a higher price in the real estate market. Even in the olden days, the urge to build high and big was always there. This is a trend

which may be very difficult to control in the present day of globalization and market economy. It is unfortunate that the designs are made more from the point of view marketing or publicity. I think, architects should look at the design from the user's point of view and in many cases, they are not listened to. That is one of the reasons that many of these buildings have 'failed' over a period of time.

How do you define ecologically sustainable building? Are urbanization and ecologically sustainable construction contradictory concepts? What are sustainable structural materials?

A building has to be sustainable from an ecological, economical and social point of view. It is finally the long term interests of the people which are important. Sustainable development is not at all against development or urbanization, but it is against uncontrolled development which serves only the short-term interest of a minority of the people. For each area, the answers to what is sustainable building will be different, depending on the physical factors such as climate, land availability, local building materials and the social and cultural

factors as well. Developing countries should try to minimize the use of high energy intensive building materials such as cement. Any use of cement is irreversible and even walls built with cement cannot be recycled, while walls built with lime can be recycled. The analysis of these things can be very complex and two people may not agree with each other. While it is impossible to design a building which is 100% sustainable, we may increase the use of sustainable materials as far as possible. For example, by using more and more timber, one can lock the carbon in the building.

Do you think ecologically sustainable constructions result in shoddy buildings? Does it interfere in creative freedom?

Why should the ecologically sustainable construction result in shoddy building and reduced creative freedom? In fact, it is more challenging or needs a higher knowledge to do a sustainable building construction. I do not consider my buildings as something which is very sustainable, but some of them are an attempt towards a more greener built environment. When I become more knowledgeable or when I am more talented, I may be able to do better buildings which are sustainable.

Can a green rating of buildings and incentives to builders be of any help?

My personal view is that green rating or the standards which are set for a country like the U.S. might not be good for every country. The purpose of the standards is to reward the building which has less negative impact on the environment. There are thousands of buildings in our villages which use much less energy in its construction and use much less energy during its use and maintenance than the platinum rat-

ed buildings. What we need to have is sustainable architecture and not something which is imported. Otherwise we will be making the same mistake when we blindly followed the western style of architecture without giving any consideration to local climate and the local materials available.

In what respect is a western-style construction different from eastern constructions?

Before the advent of the so-called 'modern architecture', the architecture was different. The architecture of London was different from that of Oxford or say Lancaster. The architecture of each district or state in India is equally differing. Then came a time when the architects thought that we do not have to worry about the climate or thermal comfort, because we have a technology which can make the indoor comfortable by using artificial methods. Although we have made great advances towards these artificial methods, now we have reached a stage where we cannot afford too many of these methods because of the harmful effects. So a time has come where we should look into our past and learn from the natural methods of cooling or heating. Also we should restrict the use of many modern materials emitting CFCs.

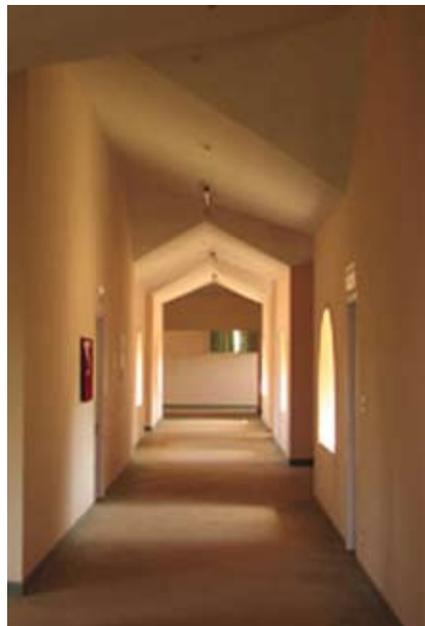
You have received your training under Laurie Baker. What was his idea of a sustainable building?

Personally, I like Laurie Baker's buildings. The biggest success of his architecture was that he was able to advocate for sustainable architecture when nobody talked about it. He saw the architecture of the rich and the architecture of the poor with the same yardstick. Also, he was able to influence a whole generation and for him, there was only one architecture where he reduced the cost as well as minimized the

use of materials.

Low-cost techniques should not be considered only for the poor — our aim should be to design only the simplest of buildings for all.” How do you respond to such an assertion in the midst of ongoing construction of capital-intensive buildings?

Baker wanted the low cost techniques not only for the poor, but also for the rich. We cannot afford to waste anything now. The control of waste is not just with techniques of construction, it has to be with the architectural design, it has to be with structural design, and it has



to be with the maintenance and the day to day use of the buildings. This is quite challenging.

Aren't the buildings of the elite upper class a derivative “mock-modern” style of architecture adopted by so many architects — both for its wastefulness of resources and inappropriateness to the climate? Is sustainable construction nothing but “loincloth architecture”?

The elite upper class has a different taste. Each person is different and he wants a different style of architecture. The poor villager

wants to imitate the city dweller and he also wants a concrete roofed building, knowing fully that it may not be suitable to the climate. But this gives him 'status' in the village. Now, house has become more of a status symbol rather than a necessity. When you design a sustainable building, it has to satisfy one's needs, not his status symbol. Another drawback is that many of the designs are done without any concept but more as a style without any depth.

Who is responsible for the mess in the urban landscape all over the world?

Developers always work with profit in their mind. This is one of the reasons that we get the kind of architecture which are now in our cities. Mostly, none of these projects get any award or so. The projects which get awards are mostly institutional buildings which are outside the city, or resorts or farm houses. Unfortunately the kind of buildings which are there in the heart of the city affect the life of the ordinary people. However, I will not blame the developers alone. In fact, the architects, planners, and above all the people are responsible for the kind of built environment which is in our cities. Perhaps we get what we deserve.

How about enforcing sustainable techniques in near future in the best interest of humanity?

It is a bit difficult. When the community becomes more conscious, then the builders and the contractors will follow sustainable practices. For them, they should sell or they should make profit. The Governmental controls will also help to some extent. Some cities in South Asia have made rainwater harvesting mandatory. Some people follow it in true spirit, while others do rainwater harvesting for the namesake. ❖