

METRO PLUS

Has South Indian style come of age?



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Chennai-based designer Benny Kuriakose bagged the Inside Outside magazine's Designer of the Year Award for a retreat he built along with Visalakshi Ramaswamy at Muttukadu. GEETA DOCTOR talks to them about the aesthetic involved in their work.

THE INSIDE Outside magazine's Designer of the Year Award has been won by Chennai-based designer Benny Kuriakose. One of the designers who collaborated with him in the award-winning project was Visalakshi Ramaswamy, also from Chennai.

Kuriakose received the award from Ashok Advani, Publisher, and Sheila Shahani, Editor of Inside Outside, the Indian Design Magazine, at Mumbai, for a weekend retreat that he had designed and built near Muttukadu, on the road to Mahabalipuram.

During a felicitation function that was attended by some of the leading architects, designers, artists, and writers and activists in the field of conservation and heritage of Mumbai, Ashok Advani emphasised the importance of good design.



"It's not just a matter of good taste," he said, "but good design reflects the evolution of a whole way of life, from culture and history to the use of materials and new technologies, to an understanding of the environmental factors that affect us all. Good design does not exist in isolation. This is why we started the idea of an annual award. We realised that there were people all over the country in small places from the Punjab to the South of the country who have been experimenting with new methods of building their homes not just by reading Inside Outside, which has been at the forefront of this awareness, but also through our exhibitions. The Award is our way of recognising the immense talent that is there in our country." It's interesting to reflect that when the magazine was started 25 years ago, one of the primary fears was that there would not be enough material to write about, after it had covered the palaces, the hotels and the heritage sites in the country. For those who live in Chennai, it is also of some significance that in the first issue, there was a photo-essay on the collection of brass pots and containers that belonged to a dancer called Chandralekha.

From the perspective of that essay, the fact that she lived in the South, made her seem as though she belonged to another country altogether. Obviously, since that time, both

Chandralekha and Inside Outside have gone a long way! It's also pertinent to note how the dancers of the South have contributed to a certain austere elegance that could be called a South Indian style. Whether it is the influence of a Rukmini Devi at Kalakshetra, or a Chandralekha, or a Leela Samson, their instinctive choice of objects, a series of brass lamps perhaps, a simple mat, a piece of woven cloth used as a backdrop, low seating areas, strong colours used against a white background, has played a definite role in forming what we now recognise as a South Indian way of living. While the earlier aesthetic could be called "Brahmin", the trend these days seems to be veering towards a more composite style that borrows from different sources from different areas in the South. In keeping with the trend for all things Chettinad, whether it's the cuisine, the sarees, the architecture or the antiques that are flooding the market, the new style could be labelled "Chettinad". In some ways, the award winning beach house is an example of the new South Indian style. It incorporates ideas from the older and more traditional styles. Indeed one of Kuriakose's intentions has been to re-cycle materials that he and Visalakshi Ramaswamy found in older buildings, and use them in a dramatic functional manner. The different elements, a traditional courtyard, a thinnai at the entrance, a stepped slope going down to a bathing tank, or pool in one part of the garden, or deep recessed verandahs supporting a low overhanging roof in the Kerala style, that Kuriakose has used in the beach house are not decorative add-ons but serve a definite purpose.

Or as he explained to his audience at Mumbai, "Though you may get some idea of the house from the photographs and write-ups that have appeared in the magazine, you will be able to enjoy the design only if you come there and see for yourself how we have managed to create some of the spaces using simple and traditional materials to reflect a contemporary style." He is certain that the environment that he has created will make people slow down. They will want to spend more time together, outside, beneath the tiled roof of the verandah, or on the equally restful flat terraced roof that has also been provided with a sheltering canopy.



Visalakshi Ramaswamy who has been one of the prime individuals in creating what could be described as a contemporary South Indian aesthetic, based on her Chettiar background and heritage, says that she's glad if winning the award makes people realise that "a home is not just a house, nor a hotel but a place that makes you feel happy." To her must go the credit for the use of colour. Ramaswamy has adapted the traditional Athangudi tiles of Chettinad in a brilliant play of colours, blues and greens with shafts of golden sunlight streaking through them, like the surface of the sea on a calm day. By way of contrast, she has used a strong bright yellow on the outer walls of the house, with the paint being textured in a rough pattern over them. The stone pillars are placed on pedestals that are again painted with matching yellows and greens and blues. Inside, the staircase that leads to the first floor has a matching pattern of tiles with the same combination of colours on the risers, while the floor is of a shiny green with dappled variations in shade. The walls are of plain white, a simulation of the Chettinad plaster that Ramaswamy is trying to revive at Chettinad. This same thick shiny style of plaster enlivens both the rounded banisters that flank the staircase, and forms a striking element in the bathrooms, where it has been used to create partitions between the bathing and washing area. Again the use of yellow on some of the walls, the outlining of the wall niches and mirrors in deep blue, the placing of tiny

rectangles within the thick walls to hold essential items, as well as the brass accessories make these areas both dramatic and functional.

Many of the windows, with orange segment shaped fanlights over some of them, or barred and grilled doors, with pierced screen ventilators on top, have been treated with dark green paint that has been flamed over to present an antique finish. Ramaswamy has selected pieces of old furniture in some of the areas, a writing desk perhaps or comfortable occasional chairs, but she has also adapted a deal wood table for dining, by painting its sides green and giving the top a border of glazed tiles with a set of ordinary painted chairs to match. The basketwork from the Chettinad area has been used as lamps, as decorative flourishes in a niche and as containers for holding food items, as in the past. "We have always been used to arranging our containers in our storerooms and during our weddings," she says, "so perhaps this form of display is ingrained in us." Ramaswamy is currently training a group of women in Chettinad to revive the traditional baskets called, "Kottan", as also the beadwork. It's interesting to speculate if this keen revival of interest in the way of life of the Nattukottai Chettiars is a result of the institution of Dakshinachitra, and the Madras Craft Foundation as well as the immense energy shown by S. Muthiah, through his books and writings of the need to preserve the past. Certainly, it was Dakshinachitra and its founder Debbie Thiagarajan that sought the help of Kuriakose, and prompted him to come to Chennai, from his native Kerala. What is equally heartening is that with so many diverse talents and cultural inputs to choose from there is nothing time bound or parochial about the new South Indian style. It is liberating.

Or as Benny Kuriakose himself explains, "I do not want to follow any particular style, but want to design spaces which people would like to use. I do not concentrate much on elevation, and prefer to use natural materials. I believe that the view of the clients is important and I try to be sensitive to their preferences."