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## BENNY KURIAKOSE

# DESIGNING DOWN TO EARTH

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By Nandhini Sundar

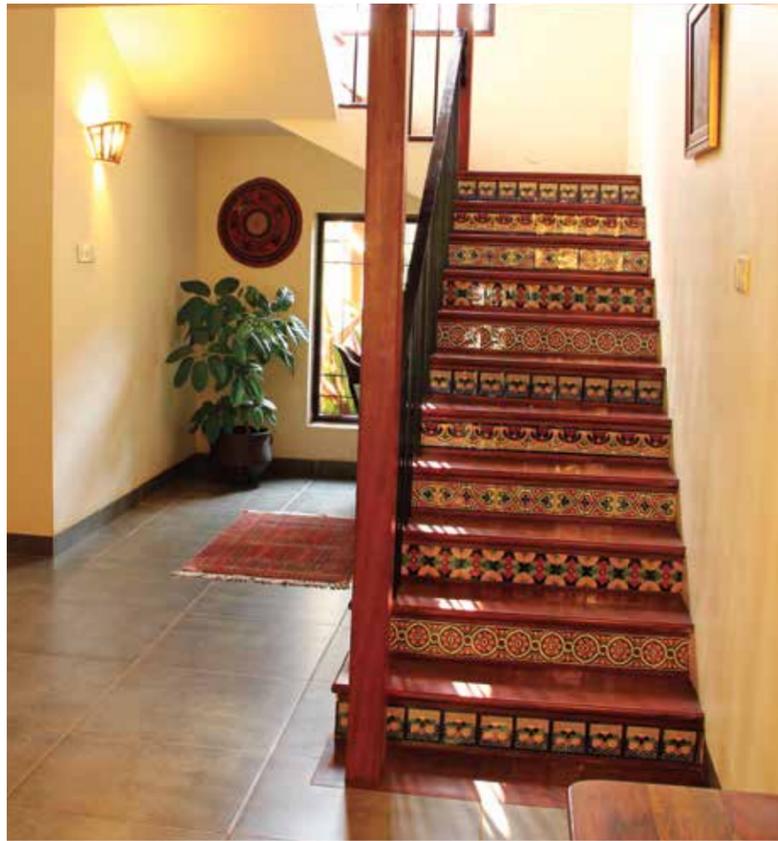
He studied civil engineering. Photography was his passion. As for his career, he wanted to become a cinematographer. But his path led towards design, drawn as he was, by an inherent liking to it. After all, design is certainly not parked on the other side of civil engineering. He could still indulge in this second passion with the foundation he had received from his undergraduate course. For, he firmly believed, a design sense is not something that is taught but intrinsic. Architecture only gives the right shape and direction to this intrinsic leaning.

Not surprisingly, he soon found himself not just designing buildings but restoring many of historical value, keeping his green sensitivities intact. Without exception, all his designs and structures were totally grounded to earth, the natural materials as well as elements present in the spaces making this intention loud and clear. That is **Benny Kuriakose** of **Benny Kuriakose Architects**. A designer who is not only grounded in his design but in his thought process and attitude too.



Facing page & Above: Wayanad House





His first tryst with design began with none other than Architect Laurie Baker, with Kuriakose learning the elements of architecture from the master and then forging on to his own path, albeit carrying his strong influence.

His project in Benegaon village in Lattur district, which involved a housing development, adopted the traditional pattern for the houses. The reconstruction of Chapredi village in Bhuj that was destroyed by the earthquake, followed after this project. The design opted addressed the earth quake sensitivity of the region while keeping the local sentiments in perspective. Not surprisingly, given his experience in working in disaster areas, the reconstruction of the settlements affected by Tsunami also came to him where he roped in community participation in the design and construction.

Stressing on the importance of research before embarking on the basics of design of a project, Kuriakose states that the concept is most important as design evolves from this. "Research thoroughly on various aspects of the project before coming up with the design", he says. His work on the Muziris Heritage project is a case in point where extensive research was done before embarking on the conservation.

The Muziris involved the restoration of 2 synagogues, 2 forts along with some of the oldest temples in the area. The excavation of the place showed links with the Muziris port besides the Roman and Middle East connection. Plenty of pottery, precious stones, old boats, even toilets were excavated. Kuriakose had to work out a concept where the history of this place would be effectively narrated. "Education and not tourism is the primary accent of the project", he says.

During the conservation he ensured that the spaces brought in sufficient light and were structured to bring in the energy along with the presence of water that offered a healing effect through its visual presence as well as the sound of it flowing. Besides tracing history and restoring the heritage, the project also included developing the infrastructure in the region to make the place tourist friendly.

Says Kuriakose, "A structure should be flexible to adapt to long term use and the design should be creative yet functional. While the design should be able to incorporate locally available natural materials, the five elements should be effectively brought in. The



Casa Rajo



Quiet by the River





Dakshina Chitra



presence of a courtyard, verandas and deep overhangs bring in natural light while keeping the interiors cool."

This design inclination is evident in his handling of the public spaces in Dakshina Chitra. Old doors, windows, sloped roofs, courtyards and verandas find their way, evoking a vernacular feel although addressing a contemporary space. "The vernacular design should be an experience, not just a style", he adds.

His design and structure of Quiet by the River, a resort by the Periyar River, accessible only by boat bears ample testimony to his contextual handling of the spaces. All the cottages enjoy a vantage view of the river from their interiors. The structure is predominantly erected with local stones with a couple of cottages boasting of timber walls. The use of concrete has been limited, with the structures erected with minimal disturbance to the existing flora.

The Ambili residence on a 7200 Sq ft area was to be structured on the lines of Kerala houses with verandas and garden spaces both in the front and back of the house. While the dining area was fashioned in the open veranda, the living and master bedroom were given an earthy feel with natural timber flooring. The interiors with their presence of old Chettinad pillars and a strong vernacular flavour, also subtly blend in the contemporary. The exteriors are brought in visually through the large expanse of glass in the living area while the bath spaces reveal an open to sky design with their glass covered roof.

His project Casa Rajo is a two storied building made of mud blocks that used fly ash and minimal cement for bonding. The main segment of the house hosts a truss roof with the verandas covered with timber rafters and Mangalore tiles. Once upon a hut was a thatched roof residence with thick walls that needed to be restructured. This was done by changing the thatch to tiles, retaining the thick walls, restructuring with recycled windows and doors, using Eucalyptus barks for timber, treating most of the country wood with cashew shell oil.

In the Paliam Palace which was a conservation project, Kuriakose converted the spaces into a museum which provides information on the Paliam family, the Dutch and Portuguese. The building, in a dilapidated state, had to be strengthened and restored. Kuriakose also widened the original damaged staircase and made provision for toilets as the original building housed none.

