

SOCIETY

# Builder of dreams



Lalitha Sridhar

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## Two decades after he first moved here, architect Benny Kuriakose continues to design enduring spaces that outlast trends

When the project that impelled Benny Kuriakose to move to Chennai was inaugurated in December 1996, he was often asked how he expected exposed brick buildings to withstand the saline, humid air at a shouting distance from the Bay of Bengal. The making of DakshinaChitra and its re-assembled houses was an undertaking with several unique tasks, including the painstaking numbering and reconstruction of hundreds of dismantled sections from old homes. Twenty years on, the must-visit heritage centre continues to stand with distinction. It is this unfaltering aesthetic that defines Benny's architecture as much as his preference for local and recycled materials, timber windows, sloping roofs, airy verandahs, and sunlit courtyards.

Benny sees his role as that of an experienced facilitator, ever mindful of the emotive significance of a first home or important enterprise. “I don’t impose my ideas,” he says. “All my projects look different because each home owner has preferences and I try to respond to their aspirations.” This quietness about him extends to the top floor of an apartment block in a sylvan residential locality, where you may find his woodsy, book-lined office appearing less like the swanky studio of a leading architect and more the den of an absent-minded professor. The discretion that he extends to his well-heeled clientèle, many of them celebrities and prominent citizens he prefers not to name, is matched only by Benny’s interest in working with anyone who takes sustainable architecture seriously. “I am not saying my way is the best,” he says. “It’s one of the ways, with some lessons from our heritage.”

Benny’s work ethic is not so much slow as it is unhurried. He questions expensive, energy-intensive trends like all-glass façades and wonders what they add to Chennai’s architectural identity. Moreover, expensive glass is meant to make the most of what little heat is available in colder climates, and is quite unsuited for our tropical metro. Benny’s distinctly-ageless signature is as evident in Sundari Silks’ elevated store styled like an inner courtyard leading up from a pillared verandah, as it is in the Hari Shree Vidyalayam School’s different-sized courtyards, which bring a variety of foliated views to its young occupants (the slender timber windows are levelled for children, so littler kids get lower windows).

The MRC Convention Centre, which he co-designed with Jeevan & Associates, features cast-iron railings, stone cladding, towers and louvres inspired by a combination of elements from the landmark architecture of the Senate House, the Chepauk Palace, the Railway Quarters on Sterling Road and old Chettinad *naattukottais*. At Spaces, the late dancer Chandralekha’s bungalow by the Besant Nagar beach, he kept every tree she loved, allowing the inventive venue for the arts to merge with them. The traditionally-designed kalari here was irretrievably lost to Cyclone Vardah and another shall be built in its place soon, even as the trees within the intimate performance area still stand tall and performances continue.

2017 looks set to be a year of hope. Benny is also conservation consultant to the Kerala government’s ambitious Muziris Heritage Project, which had become embroiled in bureaucratic snafus. The good news is that the immense initiative, on which Benny addressed a national seminar on environmental consciousness in art and architecture at DakshinaChitra in early January, is back on track. But no, he is not considering shifting back to Kerala for it, thank goodness.