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Traditional materials, contemporary style

Apart from the green concepts that add sustainable sense to buildings, it's 'no wastage' that plays a crucial role in low-cost structures, says architect Benny Kuriakose, in a chat with RANJANI GOVIND



Earthy beauty: A house like this is what architect Benny Kuriakose (inset) always believed in.

What does economy in architecture mean? It's not just cost-cutting that a creative professional looks at. "It is the art of avoiding wastage," says architect Benny Kuriakose, the recycling guru of structural design. With green architecture catching on like wild fire with educated professionals, it's but timely to talk to an old hand who's handled nothing but green concepts, being the student of the late Laurie Baker. "I am wedded to the cast, shape and blueprint of my first coach who patterned me into being a low-cost hero," says Benny.

"The science of recycling has more relevance in architecture in building earthy, artistic creations," is the premise with which he created some noticeable configurations in brick-and-mortar that earned him honours and titles.

Be it his conservation projects and reports on Srirangapatna buildings and Aneundi Palace of Karnataka, his design of Kerala's Institute of Palliative Medicine that had a concrete balm for patients housed in serene ambience, or his association with Madras Crafts Foundation that saw him transplant a hamlet of conventional dwellings into Dakshina Chitra, a creation of ethnic splendour along the sea coast of Chennai...every project has had a new 'realty storey' of its own that bagged awards.

He also advises State Governments on the feasibility of bringing in values in low-cost construction techniques for large projects with budget restrictions. *PropertyPlus* caught up recently with **Benny Kuriakose** who spoke about the exact grammar required to go green. Benny has a Master's in Conservation Studies, a result of the Charles Wallace India Trust Award he received, which took him to the University of York, U.K., for the study.

Your work reflects a garner of different styles, and that too cost effective...

I deal with a multiplicity of structures for a cross-section of customised stipulations. Yes, it is basically a garner of different styles across the country with a bold underline of the design proficiency advocated by Laurie Baker. Look at the scale of design difference if you have to handle a project like redesigning and rebuilding the village of Banegoan in Latur for the people devastated after the earthquake tragedy hit them in 1994, when *Malayalam Manorama* had commissioned the work to me, or the fashioning of Ripples Resort in Kerala.

For the former I had to think of structural endurance in low-cost equations, but with all aesthetics for living, and the latter was a delve into architectural novelties.



I don't believe in pumping money into projects at every step. Avoiding wastage of materials is by itself a challenge in lowering costs!

I call them 'no-waste' buildings, more than 'cost-effective'. Such principles will really catch on in the coming years, as you now hear of everyone talking about sustainable development.

What are your typical incorporations?

I leave no stamp of my own. I use different materials such as brick (exposed and plastered) mud, stone, bamboo, earthy tiles, thatch and concrete. Our expressions should be a commentary on how simple and unpretentious materials can be made to speak a contemporary tale by using them intelligently. I use material from rural crafts which are not energy intensive. I designed a weekend retreat where I got in some open courtyards and to take advantage of the natural light pouring in abundantly, I used Athangudi tiles in a configuration of sunlight-streaking-in colours on the floor. Some of the walls had rough-textured wall paint. The retreat has a pronounced step-down leading to the bathing tank, its peaceful verandahs amidst courtyards and pathways have designed roof-overhangs and the terraced roof is protected with a canopy...tell me, do all these factors speak of subtle imagination or costly novelties? I'm a stickler to nature, and I believe in being cost prudent. Functionality should be your ultimate goal in artistic creations.

Your passion for conservation...

Design isn't a classroom exercise. The basic skill required for an all-encompassing architect is to dabble with carpentry designery. Believe me, your eye for design begins here. It was traditional buildings and vernacular architecture that always interested me, as the logic in every shape made sense to me as they spelt real craft. You have to show distinctness in your thinking according to the existing situations, not reflect upon what was lectured in architecture schools. The principles of conservation of materials, energy, resources, traditional techniques and traditional crafts should form your design foundation.

What are the Baker theories you follow and your additions to them?

I started with strictly Baker's style with exposed brickwork, filler slab with my own team of trained craftsmen. Then when I started on my own, there were very few people who did 'low-cost buildings' and during the early 1990s I wanted to take the Baker movement further, and started using recycled materials, stone, timber roof etc.

Your comment on emerging green buildings...

An Indian style of green is what I advocate. What is green abroad is not green here. The best green buildings are the ones done by rural craftsmen. The Indian context has to be given over-riding importance. Much of the Indian architecture has a tiny environmental impact per capita when compared to the West. What we now require is not international sustainable architecture, but an