



"I am interested in creating good spaces"

Benny Kuriakose who is carrying forward Laurie Baker's glorious legacy in Kerala with his seeped-in-tradition designs talks to *AU*

What are the basic principles of designing that you consider when you take up a project?

I give importance to the location of the project, for me the context is very important. Our materials are different, our climate is different and our culture is different. These are enough to give the required variations from one building to the other. Also I try to look at the project from the user's point of view. For instance, if it is a school - the students' point of view and if it is a hospital - the patients' point of view. I think this is very important. I try to approach the design of my projects without any preconceived ideas but going by the client's brief.

As a designer, is it easy to balance your creativity and principles of design with the requirements of the client or is there a constant conflict between the two?

The design process that I use is different. I keep the principle that I have mentioned earlier in my mind. For me, a good design evolves over time and I take some time to do the design. My initial design may not be great, but it can evolve into a different design. As I said earlier, I do not have any preconceived ideas. Conflict arises when your ideas and the clients' ideas are completely different and there is no meeting point. I try to see that the conflict develops at the beginning stage itself so that there are no problems in future.

In some cases, what happens is that clients start interfering with the creative part and want to have the final say. I try to make clear that you can tell about your requirements and conditions, but you leave the creative part to me. Clients should understand that doing something different always takes time.

Most of my clients have seen at least one or two projects of mine and are familiar with the work I do. This makes it very easy.

Should architecture reflect regionalism?

Definitely. I think we should look at the climate, materials, vernacular style, traditional techniques, culture and so on. I think that one of the mistakes we have made with the so called "modern architecture" is that we forget to take the above aspects into consideration. Buildings in Beijing, Brazil, Berlin and Bombay look the same. Instead of adapting the alien architecture to suit our conditions, we adapted our lifestyle to suit the buildings. This is a great mistake that we have made and in the era of globalisation and the international style green architecture, we are continuing the same mistake.

Your projects are all based on the traditional Kerala architecture. Are they suitable for other parts of the country or world and large-scale projects as well?

I have grown up in Kerala and familiar with its traditional architecture. Hence, it is natural that a lot of these elements come into the buildings that I design.

However, I have done many buildings in Chennai and other places, which may not follow the traditional Kerala style. I am not looking at any particular style as such, but looking at designing good spaces. For me, there is no Kerala architecture, Tamil architecture, Chettinad architecture and so on. They have various styles. I am not interested in styles as such. Some of my projects will have a colonial style. Some projects may have a mixture of styles.

I am more interested in good architecture and would like to create good spaces, which the users of my buildings would like. As far as I am concerned, there is good architecture and bad architecture. If you create good spaces, everybody likes them. That is why people still like the masterpieces, they are examples of good architecture. People may like some buildings because they are trendy, but we have to see



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whether one still likes those buildings after 10 years.

Tell us about the building materials you prefer?
I tend to use natural materials such as stone,

earth and timber. I would like to use concrete in different ways, but my clients have not been that rich and am scared to take such a bold step. But timber remains one of my favourite building material and I use it extensively for my projects. It is impossible to design a building now, which is 100 percent sustainable. We will have to use materials such as cement, but we can limit them. We will have to make some compromises, which I think is alright, or else we might have to increase the use of timber to reverse the trend. By using timber in the buildings, you are not burning any fossil fuel, but you are locking the carbon. Growing more timber in its place will reduce the CO₂ in the atmosphere. By doing anything else, we can only slow down the process of global warming. By using more timber, one can lock the carbon in the building. And it is a reusable and renewable building material.

Tell us about the architecture that first fascinated you? Is there any construction in India that you can mention as truly green?

The architecture which has fascinated me most is that of my guru Laurie Baker. Then the works

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Kuriakose believes in combining traditional with modern

of Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Geoffrey Bawa. I have visited the buildings by them and liked them. It is not that I dislike the contemporary architecture by Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster but I have not seen most of their projects. I think architecture is to be experienced and not to be seen in glossy magazines or books. It is very three-dimensional. I think my buildings are much more beautiful than what photographs can convey.

Tell us about the green criteria.

Following green ratings, which are set for a country like the US, is not good for India. The purpose of the standard is to reward the building which has less negative impact on the environment. There are thousands of buildings in our villages, which used much less energy in construction and utilise much less energy during use and maintenance than Platinum-rated buildings. What we need to have is Indian sustainable architecture and not something which is imported. Otherwise we will be making the same mistake, which we did by blindly following the western style of architecture without giving any consideration to Indian climate and local materials available.

What is your opinion on post-modern buildings in India?

The only thing I can say is that I do buildings in a particular way, but I do think that what others are doing is wrong. The only thing I can say is that if I do an IT building or a shopping mall, it will be done in a different way.

Do you go for ratings like GRIHA and LEED for your projects?

I do not go for any of these ratings because my clients will have to shell out more money including getting the building certified. In the buildings that I designed even before the LEED rating came into existence, I have tried to see that they are suitable for the climate, use lesser energy and are more sustainable. I am not claiming that all my buildings are sustainable.

Should the authorities go for some more amendments to make these certifications / ratings suitable for Indian conditions? If yes, suggest the points.

I have gone through the ratings and I think the thrust should change. They are still Western in concept and the changes that have happened with the US LEED rating and the Indian LEED rating are very little.

Tell us about your current projects?

One of my dream projects was a hospital for terminally ill cancer patients, which was built attached to the Calicut Medical College. Architecture can really change the atmosphere in the hospital. I had been to various hospitals - a hospital which is friendly to patients, a hospital which has more natural light, and a hospital where one can look at trees, plants and birds through a window.

When I visited the hospital after a few months, one of the patients told me, "Half my illness is gone when I come here." One of the doctors also told me that this was a hospital he would really love to work at. They told me about the bad experiences that they had earlier - one had to sit and wait for a long time to see the doctor, once you were in, you had to lie down and look at the ceiling, and the spaces were unfriendly to children.

It was also a project where lot of inputs came from the doctors and other staff working in the hospital. One of the questions I posed to all of them was where would you like to spend the last few days of your life. Everybody said that they would like to spend the last days in home. The next question I asked was what will bring the homely feeling. Many of the elements which they mentioned were there in our traditional houses, but not in our modern flats and buildings.

What are the biggest challenges that you faced as an architect?

The biggest challenge that the profession is facing today is in ensuring quality in construction and making buildings more sustainable.