

Following a 'fluid and evolving' design approach

Benny Kuriakose, the Chennai-based architect believes there is only good architecture and bad architecture. He also advocates sustainable architecture. But his take on sustainability is different from the run-of-the-mills explanations that we hear normally...

Benny's approach to a design is characterized by fluid and ever-changing reflections that follows the universal dynamics of the hermeneutical circle. It's based on the interpretations and limitations of the context. His designs factor in his previous design experience, parameters, restrictions and most importantly, the client to generate an initial metaphorical projection of pre-understanding. "I try to design for the client and in such a way that there is constant dialogue between the architect and the client, each affecting the other in various ways, leading and influencing the final design of the building. This leads the

design to progress and clarify as it is continually revised in the light of the constant and evolving interpretations of the parameters leading to final design that is unique and catered to the user," explains Benny.

"The architecture I know is very complex and it has many dimensions social, cultural, technical, political etc. And judging a building whether it is green by giving marks is very superficial. I am not questioning green rating etc, but I want to tell that they do not capture the richness, or the complexity or the diversity of our architecture. My way of judging what is green is different," Benny points out his view on the larger aspect of sustainability.



First floor verandah



Benny Kuriakose started his career in 1984 and received basic lessons in architecture under the tutelage of Laurie Baker. Benny's approach to architecture can be seen in the range of his work: in individual houses, resorts and institutional projects, in the Dakshinachitra project in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, in the rehabilitation of disaster affected sites at Nagapattinam, Bhuj or Latur and in the Heritage Project at Muziris in Kerala. He has offered his services as consultant to UNDP, various State Governments and other organizations.

Two of Benny's projects; **Wayanad House** and the resort **The Quiet, by the River** featured here showcase his attitude towards architecture and sustainability.

The Wayanad House in Kerala is a perfect example of making use of locally sourced materials. The vacation home, designed as a bungalow is situated in the rugged terrain of the Western Ghats in Wayanad, Kerala. The house has expansive views and luxurious interiors which has made abundant use of timber. Although contemporary in appearance, traditional techniques were employed to craft the timber elements. The whole building is done with a timber roof and ceiling. Only one side of the building is masonry, while the walls of the other three sides are built with timber and glass. Glass walls have been used because the climate in a hill station is quite different from the plains.



The views of the Western Ghats are splendid from the bed room, the hall and the verandah. The flooring is timber in the bed room, the hall and the verandah. "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," says Benny.

Material choices were accorded primary importance at the beginning of the design process. To allow views, a great degree of transparency was required. Not one to use glass extensively in his projects, Benny decided to go with the material here, considering that the climate of Wayanad is mostly temperate with a distinct winter season. Wood was chosen as the main material for the interiors to introduce an aura of warmth and relaxation befitting of a weekend home. Brick walls had to be kept to a minimum. In the completed



Benny's projects speak of sustainability as an inborn attribute rather than a forced scheme. According to him sustainability will undergo changes over a period of time as society has undergone changes, and aspirations & concept about a house have changed.



home, cement tiles lead up to the front facade built with masonry walls. On entering the home, however, the gaze is immediately drawn outwards to the striking views of the lush landscape through the three tall glass walls. Though the initial scheme had the frames designed using only timber, a compromise had to be made during execution due to structural constraints. Concrete columns were employed, but only for the corners. The client being an owner of a timber business was keen on featuring extensive woodwork in the interior details.

Therefore, the doors, floor, ceiling, roof and stairs, are crafted from wood and the glass walls comprise timber frames. Three different local species of wood from the forests of Wayanad was mostly used. Priced at nearly a third of the cost of teak, it is more durable and stronger than teak. An evocative combination of wood and glass, this contemporary home strikes a supple balance with tradition.

In tune with nature

The second project, nestled in greenery in the Malaytoor Forest Area, The Quiet, by the River is an environment conscious resort. Acquired as a



"The biggest challenge is to come out of the style syndrome". The Wayand House and The Quiet by the River are showcases of his way of approaching designs without preconceived notions or ideas – but his designs have the power to change the way people live. "That is what architecture is all about".

– Benny Kuriakose



rubber plantation by the promoters, the idea of building a resort came about subsequently. The objective was to enable guests to savor the natural beauty of river Periyar, while staying in a homely setting, unhurried by rules as set in typical commercial resorts. The resort is based on locally sustainable tourism with majority of employees being from the area itself. This provides local expertise while providing employment opportunities in the area.

The resort itself is mostly built with an architecture suited to the surroundings. In line with the theme of being environmentally friendly, most of the wood used in the resort is recycled from old buildings and furniture.

Each cottage is built with old wood salvaged from more than 100-year-old bungalows, so the cottages give a very quaint feel. The different pieces were transported here where they were put together by craftsmen specializing in renovation of old wooden structures. This cottage has a wide verandah all around. Abandoning planned architecture associated with most commercial properties, the resort is built keeping space and privacy in mind. All rooms in the resort gives an excellent view of the stream and the main river in all its splendor and one can spend hours sitting and watching the gurgling river.

Sujatha Thamban

Pan Front Elevation

