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# METROPLUS WEEKEND

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# Heart in Heritage

**CHATLINE** Conservation architecture must be taken up with a sense of urgency, Benny Kuriakose tells **DIVYA KUMAR**

**CARE AND CONSERVATION** Benny Kuriakose PHOTOS: (COVER AND ABOVE) V. GANESAN

**"A** city without heritage spaces is like a person without memory," says architect Benny Kuriakose emphatically as we sit down in his office for a chat.

Kuriakose's a laconic man, not generally given to grand speeches, but his passion for the conservation of heritage buildings comes through clearly as we speak.

"Historical buildings give the city a unique character, an identity, and once lost, they can't be replaced," stresses Kuriakose, who did his masters degree in conservation architecture from York University as one of the early Charles Wallace awardées in the 1980s. "Imagine what Beach Road would look like if the DGP

building and Queen Mary's College had been demolished as planned in the nineties."

They weren't, of course, thanks to the strenuous protests of conservationists in the city. But other beautiful old structures weren't as lucky — the Moore Market and the Spencer's buildings come immediately to mind. "When Spencer's went down, nobody even thought of protesting," he comments. "In those days, old buildings had no value, and no one was talking about conservation architecture in India. But slowly, awareness has grown."

Very few people were talking about conservation architecture even when Kuriakose returned from the U.K. in 1987; indeed, he was one

of the first few Indians to specialise in the field. "It hadn't grown as a profession — there were hardly any projects underway and it took years to implement those that were," he recalls. "For example, I did the initial proposal for the Senate House restoration in 1989, but the work was carried out 15 years later."

His love for heritage architecture began in the days when he worked under the late British-born architect Laurie Baker in Kerala. Baker was famously fond of using traditional Kerala-style architecture in his buildings, and as Kuriakose travelled with him studying monuments such as the Padmanabhapuram palace near Nagercoil, his own interest grew. When he began assisting in the

preliminary research for Deborah Thiagarajan's ambitious Dakshina-Chitra project, that interest turned into fascination.

It was his close involvement with DakshinaChitra that brought Kuriakose from his native Kerala to Chennai 12 years ago — he designed all but one of the public buildings, and oversaw the reconstruction work on most of the traditional houses. "The work needed constant supervision, so I moved," he says matter-of-factly. "It was like a jigsaw puzzle, dismantling, moving and putting together all those old buildings — it was a whole other level of learning."

All that he's learnt as a conservation architect, Kuriakose pours into the newer buildings he designs,

whether it's using vernacular-style parapets, pillars and *thinna*s in his designs or experimenting with traditional principles of lighting and cooling. And he says that more and more people today respond to the use of these old-style elements in architecture. "I often see people bringing their architects or engineers with them to DakshinaChitra and saying, 'I want this sort of ventilation, flooring or verandah,'" he says. He adds thoughtfully, "I really think it's because people are tiring of the concrete-and-glass structures that are crowding our cities, and need a contrast."

The architect doesn't mince any words when it comes to his own opinion of the growing concrete jungle.

"If you ask anyone to name 10 or 15 of the best buildings that have come up in the city recently, they would have no answers," he says bluntly. "I'm not against new buildings, but we have to ask ourselves if they're adding to the architectural quality of the city as a whole."

The good news, however, is that with growing public awareness and interest, there is definitely more money being put into heritage conservation today, both by the Government and private companies. "The most expensive resorts, nowadays, often feature heritage structures and homes," he comments. "It's taken us a long time to realise that the old thatched-roof houses in Mylapore are as much a part of our heritage as

grand old monuments such as the Taj Mahal."

Protests seem to have halted LIC's proposed plan of demolishing the old Bharath Insurance building, and the Victoria Memorial Hall, which has lain in disuse for the last decade or more, is going to be renovated by the Government. "These are all very good signs, showing a change in the attitude of people," says Kuriakose.

But he's still gripped by a sense of urgency. "In just the last five years, we've lost so many old buildings," he says. "We need to make a push to save them — write reports, utilise Government funds — and it's best done as early as possible, before any more of Chennai's cultural heritage is lost."