

Towards a greener city

Pic/R Ravindran

ONE of his greatest works, Benny Kuriakose would say humbly, is the designing of 1,500 rehabilitation houses for the tsunami victims in Tranco-bar, and earthquake resistant homes in Gujarat and Maharashtra. The 44-year-old architect, who has the credit of designing DakshinChitra, the centre of traditional art, craft and architecture of India on the East Coast Road, has worked with famous British architect Laurie Baker, who pioneered cost-effective buildings. His most acclaimed work includes designing the home of actor Mammooty. **Sujata Chakrabarti** speaks to Benny about his work at his home in MRC Nagar.



● **You are often addressed as a "green architect." Can you tell us how it is reflective of your work?**
I try not to look at the initial cost of the building alone. I like to make use of concepts, materials and techniques which are more sustainable. You not only look at the initial costs, but also at the life-cycle costs and the impact on the environment. Hence, I tend to use lot of natural materials and traditional techniques.

● **What cost-effective techniques do you employ in your design?**
Cost-effective techniques is

always a relative term. It is cost-effective when compared to something else. It is not the construction cost of the building that matters. We have to look at the performance and maintenance cost of the buildings also. You may reduce the initial cost, but may spend quite a lot for improving the thermal performance of the building. You can

improve the thermal performance by using design principles such as overhangs, or even planting trees around the buildings.

● **While designing DakshinChitra, did you have any specific design in mind? What characteristic flavour does it have of your work?**
The design brief which was giv-

en to me is that I should use traditional concepts and show that one can have a contemporary building. This should create an interest in the public. I used some recycled columns because they were already in the collection of the museum. Courtyards, verandahs, varying heights of sloping roofs, overhangs, arches and exposed

brickwork were some of the traditional features used in the buildings in DakshinaChitra. The main entrance building had come up 10 years ago, when people were not talking much about the ethnic style.

● **How do you assess a design in terms of climate, landscape material and techniques?**

As far as possible, the design should suit the climate. All our vernacular buildings were suitable for the climate. In the present time, when we are talking about sustainable development and sustainable architecture, this has more relevance.

I do not follow any particular style and I use all kinds of materials in my designs. Exposed brickwork, plastered walls, RCC roofs, timber roofs and steel roofs. But I have learnt from the vernacular techniques and materials and I think they are more suitable for our climate. I like to vary the designs also and to make each design different, it is more challenging.

● **What are the other works that appeal to your aesthetic taste?**

I love old heritage buildings. The Lotus Temple in Delhi is a work of commendable stature. Abroad, the charm of the old buildings in the city of Prague makes me want to go back again and again.

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