



# Old is Surely Gold

*Muziris Heritage Project is the first of its kind in the country. The project started in 2008 in collaboration with 19 government departments and international agencies including UNESCO. The Central Government aid of Rs. 41 crore for the project is the biggest allocation for a conservation plan ever in the country. In the initial phase of the project, four out of the 27 museums, two synagogues, and two archaeological sites will be opened to the public. It will take more than 10 years for the entire master plan to get implemented.*

**B**enny Kuriakose is one of India's leading conservation architect who made several marks. Be it in the rehabilitation villages for victims of the Latur and Kutch earthquakes and re-design of the tsunami affected villages of Chinnangudi and Nagapattinam, or the Anegundi Palace of Karnataka, the serene ambience of Kerala Institute of Palliative Medicine, transformation of a conventional hamlet to ethnic splendor at Dakshina Chitra. And to surpass all, he is the chief consultant of the Muziris Heritage Project of Government of Kerala.

Excerpts from his chat with FWD Media:

## My Style

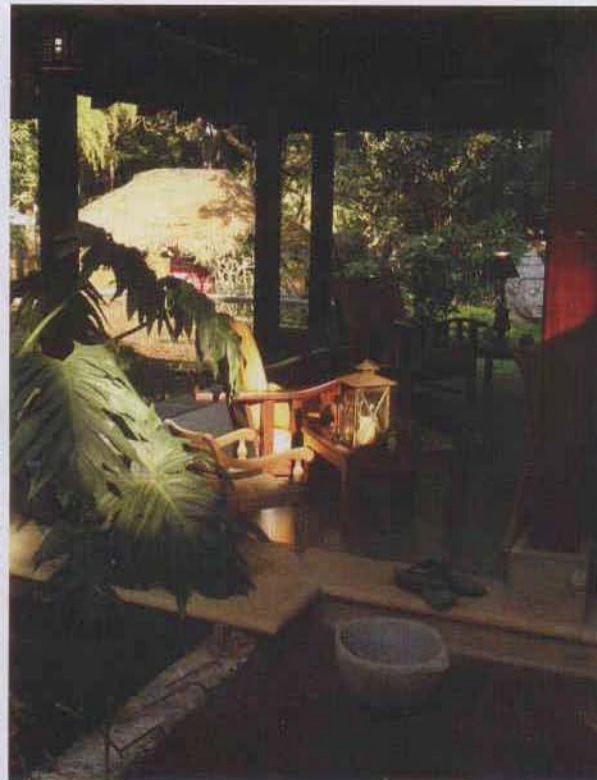
Traditional buildings and vernacular architecture always fascinate me. Each shape in them have a logic

and sense of real craft. I use material from rural crafts that are not energy intensive and I believe being natural is cost prudent. More and more people today respond to the use of old-style elements like vernacular styled parapets, pillars and thinnais or experimenting with natural lighting and cooling. I think it's because people are tired of concrete-and-glass structures and need a contrast.

But, buildings should reflect the individuality of the client and not mine. I discuss even the elevation ideas with my clients to make each project different.

## Construction industry today

The cost of construction is going up every year and this is something which is not in our hands. But still we can avoid the waste in construction and lower



the costs. It will be very relevant in the coming years because now you hear many talks about sustainable development. We need a sustainable architecture with lessons from our traditional techniques and materials. The best green buildings in India are the ones done by the rural craftsmen and I believed that they are the real craftsmen.

Maintaining the quality of construction is another big challenge. Over the years, the speed of construction has increased at the expense of quality of workmanship. The present day buildings will not last as much as our old buildings.

### About heritage conservation

Conserving a building which is mostly recommended for demolition and converting them for contemporary use without losing its character is a real challenge. One should have a passion for matters of the past to take up a career like this. Thirty years back, when I returned from UK, very few people were talking about conservation. But today, there is a renewed interest in historic buildings and even governments and private companies are actively working for it.

### Projects close to heart

A project, close to my heart is the Institute of Palliative Medicine, Kozhikode, which has a wing for the terminally ill. It is a place where they would spend their last days. Everyone would like to be in their home at this time. So the entire focus went for making the hospital feel like a home. The wards were designed in such a way that one can look through the window and natural light seeps in from everywhere, whereas in other hospitals the patients will just have to look at the ceiling. With open verandahs and informal spaces like built-in-seats, the patients can have refreshed walks. Even the walls have exciting colours instead of the depressing whites. A few months after completion when I visited the hospital and enquired with one of the patients he said that being in such a place makes him feel that half his disease had gone.

### Places, People and Structures inspired and influenced

Of course, Laurie Baker who taught me the basics. Padmanabhapuram Palace was one of my all time favorite place where I learnt about the traditional architecture of Kerala. I am influenced by my clients,

*Benny is well known for his outstanding use of traditional elements in a contemporary context. His name is uniquely associated with the exploration of a cost effective and environment friendly architectural vocabulary.*





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fellow professionals and all the craftsmen with whom I worked. I still travel for more than a month to newer places, trying to see more and more. For architects, traveling is important.

### **About Muziris Project**

It is a project for the future generation -an endeavour to fill the visitor's mindscape with a culture 3,000 years back. It is primarily intended to be a centre for education rather than tourism, with focus on sustainability and involvement of the local communities. To name a few from its constitutes are interactive museums, visitor centres, a virtual reconstruction centre, boat visits to various monuments, cycle tours and circuit tours.

**Laurie Baker taught me the basics. Padmanabhapuram Palace was one of my all time favorite place where I learnt about the traditional architecture of Kerala.**

As one being involved in conservation for the last 25 years, I have seen many historic buildings disappearing. Perhaps Muziris Heritage Project might put a stop to this. This will make the people aware that heritage is something important.