

BUILDING ICONS BENNY KURIAKOSE

by Jaya Sharma





Benny, you are one of the few architects to explore the possibility of incorporating traditional styles into the contemporary context. Please tell us about the inspiration behind it.

I had worked with Laurie Baker. His motto was that we should be designing and thinking 'like Indians for Indians' in India. His use of natural and local materials has influenced me greatly. The other major factor would have been the various trips I have made to different locations within Kerala to study traditional buildings.

Laurie Baker is synonymous with the revival of vernacular/meaningful architecture, how was it to work with him?

Laurie Baker had no office to speak of; the training was onsite. And so was all the learning. He did not have any inhibitions in teaching an assistant how the design is being planned and executed.

In the initial years of my career, I designed buildings strictly adhering to the Laurie Baker style. At some point I realised that there was no point in designing exactly the way Baker used to. This was the turning point in my career as I started experimenting with different materials. Thereafter, my work looked different.

The village of Banegaon in Maharashtra; Vishram by the sea, Dakshinchitra and Sundari Silks in Chennai; Anegundi Palace in Karnataka and the Backwater Ripples Resort in Kumarakom-- all tell the story of Benny Kuriakose, the architect who designs to precision, taking into account every centimetre of space available. He imbibes cost effective techniques and uses natural materials to reflect the local flavour in his designs. Each structure built by Benny is

an example of unique architecture which will hold the fancy of generations to come.

"The younger generation should take more interest in creating buildings which are more suitable for the Indian conditions. Now, most of the buildings in India do not reflect the Indian reality. We adjust to the structure rather than structure being built to suit us," says Benny Kuriakose who talks to Jaya Sharma about architecture, Laurie Baker and influences that shaped his work.

What aspect of architecture fascinates you the most?

Our design can change the way people live. That is what architecture is all about. I am now working on a home for the mentally challenged and a taluk hospital for the government. If my design is good then the architecture will be appreciated by the people who occupy the building.

Is there a chasm between collegiate architectural curriculum and the actual practice of architecture? If so, what advice would you give to a student to prepare them for the profession?

Architecture is a creative field. Creativity cannot be taught but a teacher can direct a student towards the path of creativity. The students should travel widely and see the real Indian villages before they start designing. They need to understand the use of materials and the different crafts especially those related to architecture. They should try to understand the concepts behind the vernacular architecture and not focus only on styling. Styling is only skin deep.

What have been the rewards of practicing architecture?

I am enjoying my work as an architect and I would like to continue for as long as possible. Architecture unlike many other arts is a public art; the public can view the architecture.





GEOFFREY BAWA



*The Batujimbar Estate, Sanur, Bali, 1973
by Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's most prolific and
influential architect.*

"I like the buildings done by Geoffrey Bawa and his work has influenced me. He has used natural materials and his architecture was very different from what many others followed in Asia. Unlike many, he did not draw his inspirations from the West."

- Benny Kuriakose



a whole is not doing much about this. With green buildings and sustainable architecture, it is important to reduce the consumption of resources.

In vernacular architecture, energy conservation is an important factor. How essential is it to you?

Energy conservation is very important. The approach to this is also equally important. It is not enough that you let in all the heat and then use energy saving methods in air-conditioning. It is essential to reduce the need or the use of air-conditioning. Another important aspect is to use natural light to the maximum. Many of the modern buildings are dependent on artificial light even when there is enough sun.

What is the biggest challenge you face as an architect?

The biggest challenge lies in ensuring the quality of construction. Over the years, the speed of construction has increased at the cost of quality while the standard of workmanship has fallen. For me, there is no short cut for good craftsmanship.

Have you ever made a pilgrimage to visit a specific structure?

Yes, I must have visited the Padmanabhapuram Palace at least 100 times. I think it is one of the most beautiful building complexes in the world. The timber-roofed structures are the best examples of traditional Kerala architecture.

You went back to designing furniture. Though it is an extension of architecture, can you tell us how you weave the two together?

Designing furniture has helped me understand the details and the relevance of the minor dimensions. In furniture, even one centimetre can make a lot of difference to the piece and this has helped me in designing the buildings with more confidence.

Is there any difference in the North Indian and South Indian perceptions of architecture?

The architecture in North India and South India should be different. Each place has a different climate, different materials and different cultures. This should reflect in the architecture.

What are the main determinants in the design process for you?

I try to use natural methods of cooling, take the climatic conditions into account and use natural materials. I do not follow any particular style, but do incorporate traditional elements.

Do you think that architecture still has a role to play in finding a solution to low cost housing?

Yes, it is a pity that we are not able to solve the problem of housing in India. There are more than 45 million families without a house in India and the building profession as

