

Building on local wisdom

Vernacular buildings, recycled approaches, sustainability and green ratings....architect Benny Kuriakose has his signature 'green take' on all these, in a conversation with RANJANI GOVIND

It is unfortunate that Indian architecture today hardly carries lessons from the wisdom integral to our village constructions, rues architect Benny Kuriakose. "Build techniques in the innards of Indian rural communities are ready-made lessons in sustainability," says the Chennai-based architect-designer, who spoke to *The Hindu-HABITAT* as he whizzed past Bangalore recently. With a sagacity to garner in a mix of styles, Benny's basic Kerala background directs his vernacular approaches where need-based design and material hold the key.

Benny Kuriakose, who was in Kerala government's expert committee for studying the feasibility of adopting low-cost technology in buildings, has wilfully steered clear of getting attracted to commercial, energy-guzzling materials. His re-cycled methods are fashioned to create a refined earthy elegance, while his 'vision of aesthetics' has earned him a string of awards. "It is gratifying that in my five decades of architecture, I have not been labelled a 'man of extravagance' but as someone who looks at waste as a resource," says Benny who strengthened his design proficiency on the strong foundation that Laurie Baker laid for him. Benny has a Master's in

Conservation Studies and has recently submitted his doctorate thesis for which he 'shut himself' for nearly a year from on-site architecture.

Sustainable development is all about avoiding wastage of materials to bring down costs, he says, preferring to call his buildings 'no-waste buildings', rather than 'cost-effective buildings.' His signature is seen in many. 'Dakshinachitra' at Chennai with pathways and courtyards amidst the recreated architecture of transplanted buildings; Institute of Palliative Medicine at Calicut; weekend retreat in Muttukadu; a landmark re-building work at Banegoan village of Latur after the tragic earthquake; Mammooty's residence in Kerala; and conservation of the Anegundi Palace in Karnataka; or fashioning the Ripples Resort in Kerala.

Excerpts from the interview...

What was your thesis about that made you be off-site for a while?

My thesis is trying to compare two case studies — one is the One Lakh Housing Scheme carried out by the Government of Kerala and the other is the Marianad Fishing Village Housing project carried out by an NGO. I am trying to define the success of a housing project while analysing the reasons for the success. The study gave some insights into the



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indicators or factors which influence the achievement or failure of mass housing projects.

What difference do you see in vernacular architecture that you have been trained in, as compared to the newly coined 'green architecture'?

As the Austrian-American architect Bernard Rudofsky has said, vernacular architecture can be termed 'architecture without architects.' It is based on local climate, local materials and the prevailing culture. It's variously

called traditional architecture, rural architecture or even non-pedigree architecture! The so-called 'green architecture' hyped for the last two decades was practised by our villagers long ago. With technology, the trend shifted from designs being climate-specific as air-conditioners were the answer for all ills. It was only in the 1970s, with the energy crisis, that we realised the 'limits to growth,' but it took much longer to raise the 'green buildings' slogan.

Does vernacular architecture include elements within the ambit of functional architecture across cities?

Why are we designing buildings with no consideration for local climate, materials or culture? Instead of adapting technology to our needs, we have adapted 'western products.' Why should we have glass buildings when the aim is to reduce the amount of heat coming inside? In Europe the need is the opposite. I know that since our



life has changed quite a bit socially, culturally and economically, we have limitations in going back to some aspects of the past, so the solutions to the present malaise lies somewhere in between.

Each location has a different kind of architecture depending upon the materials and climate. India has diversity in terms of architecture too and it is sad that we are not making use of this in our new buildings. The architecture of Rajasthan is different from Kerala or Assam. We should not repeat mistakes by blindly following the architecture or standards set in the West.

How are you taking your ideas across practically to reach people?

I try to incorporate elements from vernacular architecture. I don't claim that the buildings I have designed are green. But the buildings built by villagers are much greener than the platinum-rated green buildings. In some buildings, the timber used for making roofs has been reused; doors and windows have been salvaged to look regal in many projects. In fact, you can find some use or the other of all materials from old buildings, especially timber. I had been working in the alternative stream and saying 'no' to many apartment and commercial projects. But I realised that apartments are the ones that are changing the face of the cities,

and there is a possibility that they can be designed differently. After my passionate association with the Muziris Heritage Project in Kerala where the Government wanted to reinstate the historical and cultural significance of the legendary port of Muziris, I am trying to advocate 'green living' rather than 'green buildings.'

We have been studying the drawbacks of the apartments mushrooming where the architecture and design are controlled by the developers more than the architects. But may be it is possible to design something where builders are benefited and we as architects can aid 'green living' that will benefit the occupants in the long run.

What do you think of green ratings that are a fad these days?

I do not understand the system of allotting marks for a green building. The architecture I know is very complex and it has many dimensions such as social, cultural, technical, political etc. And judging a building, whether it is green, by giving marks is very superficial. I am not questioning the green rating, but I want to say that they do not capture the richness, complexity or the diversity of our architecture. My way of judging what is green is different, as I have explained. Perhaps it might guide those people who do not understand what sustainability is.