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**TAMIL NADU SPECIAL**



## DAKSHINACHITRA A TIMELESS PORTRAIT OF THE SOUTHERN LAND

*Text: Team Design Detail / Photos: Dr. Benny Kuriakose*

**T**raditions and culture binds the ethnic fabric that has woven the fine tapestry along the peninsula of India. The southern states that bind the Indian plate amidst the mighty Arabian Sea and the epic Bay of Bengal are Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Filled with mystic tales and spiced aromas that instill deep feelings etched into the life of Southerners in India. The ethnicity spread around these regions was sculpted to form the place called Dakshinachitra, also known as the picture of the south.

Designed as a heritage village that display the vernacular way of South Indian lifestyle. In the year 1996 Dakshinachitra opened its doors to the public at Muttukadu in Tamil Nadu. It is the project of a non-profit organisation called Madras Craft Foundation. It was conceived as an outdoor museum to revive the life and environment dwelled by the people of South. It is a vibrant centre that becomes a place to learn and unwind. Late Ar. Laurie Baker offered his services

encompassing his techniques to the spatial conceptualization of the village. The meticulous methodology reinforced with his philosophy captivated the masons and craftsmen to envision and paint it on the canvas of land. The 10-acre complex was created with ticket counters, a reception, seminar halls, workshops and display spaces, a craft bazaar, item stores and a restaurant. The concept was an evolution of understanding the traditional elements integrated in a contemporary context while sensitively approaching the factors like climate, location and availability of materials.

Architectural spaces such as courtyards, verandas along with elements like jali and pitched roofs speak a language of time invoking a rustic character in the buildings. The intricate system of rafters and beams held by the classic craft of joinery resonate an authentic traditional charm. While exposed brick and stone exude the overall effect. The structural members such as granite columns and stone slabs from old buildings integrate harmoniously while respecting the pride and heritage.



*Koothattukulam Christian House*

Debbie Thiagarajan, the founder of Dakshinachitra evolved the principles of Laurie Baker into the context of the site while persuading him to design the site. Baker has archived many drawings and diagrams that portray his vision. Guest House 1 was constructed by Baker with intricate instructions and notes were laid out especially for the Weaver's House and Chettiar House. Baker's initial idea for the masterplan was a map, visualized as each state with its own walkways and alleys that deal with the life of ordinary people. Envisioning bold and attractive entrances fused with interesting circulation patterns and movements

that delight the visitors. While bringing in the rush and pompous thrill into the exhibition spaces. Baker used to say that "Architecture is mostly common sense, so if you look carefully at the buildings and try to understand the materials. You should be able to solve most of the problems." Due to some circumstantial issues the original site had to be shifted while it made some alterations to the site plan. Dr. Benny Kuriakose came into the picture working on the path set by Baker in Dakshinachitra. He was associated with Baker and Debbie in 1984 with Madras Craft Foundation. He was involved since 1995 with the construction



DR. BENNY KURIAKOSE

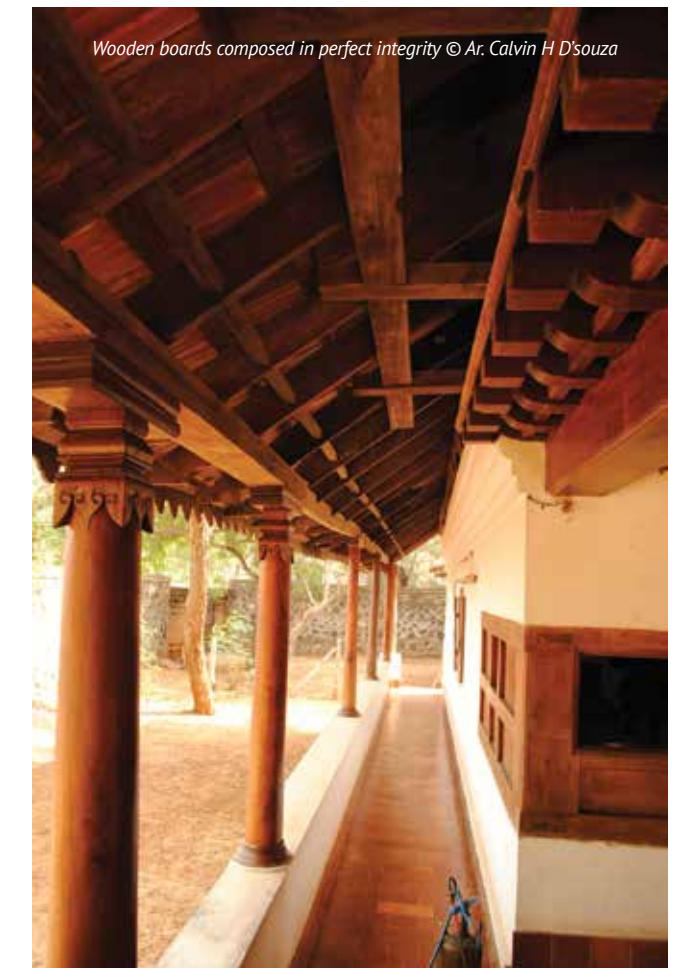
Benny Kuriakose started his career in 1984 and received lessons in architecture under the tutelage of master architect Laurie Baker. Benny has travelled diverse paths and translated the philosophy of his mentor. He received Charles Wallace India Trust award for MA in conservation studies from University of York, UK and doctorate from IIT, Madras. He transforms spaces using the concepts of cost-effectiveness, conversation and sustainable architecture. His work reflects the perseverance adhering to universal principles in every range of projects such as individual houses, resorts, institutional design and rehabilitation works.



*Stonewall entrance to Karnataka houses © Ar. Ashmi E Anil*



*Sit out spaces make a harmonious entry © Ar. Calvin H D'souza*



*Wooden boards composed in perfect integrity © Ar. Calvin H D'souza*




*View of the Calicut House © Ar. Ashmi E Anil*



*Syrian Christian House emotes the Kerala tradition*



*Sloping roofs and wooden walls evoke an ethnic dimension*

position. Measured drawings were done with utmost precision, cross checking ever minute detail. Every stage had to be photographed and recorded to make the reassembly less chaotic. Diverse methods of construction devoid of nails made it much easier to dismantle and assemble. A few parts were damaged and could not be reused in reconstruction. The traditional thought-provoking systems made the whole team to solve intriguing details with the help of their senior craftsmen. The whole operation executed by Benny Kuriakose has indeed saved an era that is getting lost. Dakshinachitra will truly remain as an epitome of life in south India. It breathes as a cross-cultural centre exploring the art, architecture, lifestyle and crafts by exhibiting, promoting and preserving beyond borders. 

of Calicut House, Puthupally House and Koothattukulam House at the Kerala section. Most of Baker's ideas had to be changed because of the site shift. When Benny Kuriakose took up the work, he followed the same vocabulary of Guest House 1 into the construction methods. He brought in a touch of contemporary style to the main entrance block which sets as an example for visitors to understand the ways in which traditional elements can be used in the present day architecture.

Similarly he designed other structures such as the potter's kiln, the administrative building and school of traditional design while imbibing the spirit of Laurie Baker and his timeless philosophies. His extensive reconstruction works for Kerala architecture followed a procedure of numbering and assembling. Each member numbered to smoothly arrange it to its



*Courtyards form breathing spaces*



*Blend of traditional and contemporary styles*