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## NEWS

## Marrying the past with the present is his forte

Che Kurrien

**Mumbai, December 1:** An accurate description of acclaimed architect Benny Kuriakose would be 'versatile.' His work ranges from the verdant Kumarakom Resort in Kerala to two villages reconstructed from rubble following the Latur and Kutch earthquakes; from Malayalam film star Mammooty's abode to signature pieces of furniture.

Though Kuriakose is deeply influenced by traditional architectural styles of his native Kerala, his designs blend easily with contemporary contexts. Typifying his style — which marries characteristics from the past and present — is an award-winning beach house located on the Coromandel Coast between Chennai and Mahabalipuram. This design caught the attention of the magazine Inside Outside, which named Kuriakose their 2001 designer of the year for weekend retreats, felicitating him on Friday evening.

Having begun his career in 1984 under the revolutionary Laurie Advertisement Baker, Kuriakose learnt from his mentor how to use natural materials like mud, lime and timber — the hallmark of the prolific American architect's work in Kerala. Kuriakose says he also inculcated Baker's value for the client's preferences. "Baker taught me to listen carefully to clients' needs, and to accommodate them wherever possible," he says. Work flowed in freely, but as the 90s approached, Kuriakose was feeling stifled and burnt out. "I wasn't enjoying my work. I was fed up and felt I was on the wrong track," he notes. He quit his job, moving to his ancestral village for a few years, where he learnt to make furniture from local carpenters and craftsmen. "Working on furniture taught me the importance of precision: Even a centimetre makes a huge difference in terms of comfort!" he says.

Finally, a personal commission from Mammooty lured him back to building design. "I was earlier in awe of Baker, but my hiatus helped define my own style," he says, adding, "I still retain many of Baker's principles, but not all." So, unlike Baker, Kuriakose is not obsessively cost-conscious. "I try to be cost effective, but not at any price," he says. "You have to look at the building's performance and the benefit gained from it."

Another feature of Kuriakose's work is its emphasis on natural light and cross-ventilation. He believes in flexibility, the structural remodelling of a house, if desired. "In the past, roofs could be taken out, wooden supports adjusted — giving the house new dimensions. Current designs, with concrete and steel, is inflexible," he says. Wherever possible, Kuriakose uses local, eco-friendly material, besides nurturing a sensitivity to local architectural culture. In reconstructing the quake-ravaged villages, he was careful to consider local customs. "I wanted villagers to be comfortable with their new environment, so the new spaces and structures had to be in sync with their way of life," he says.

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