

An architect with a passion for restoration 🗨

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Architect Vinod Kumar.

Thrissur: While there are many who do not appreciate traditional dwellings of Kerala because of various reasons, there is general consensus among many that traditional architecture in Kerala is practical rather than spectacular, sustainable rather than mordant and harmonious with nature rather than standing out in isolation. Perhaps this is the reason why this style of architecture is becoming popular even though a majority of Keralites in the late seventies and eighties had abandoned it for modern designs and styles. This form of architecture, with all its inherent values, is today being ably promoted by many young architects who appreciate its relevance to the modern society.

While it is not difficult to find many architects who would be willing to include elements of traditional Kerala architecture in a modern design perspective, Architect Vinod Kumar in Thrissur believes in the innate value of this style of architecture and has been trying to harmonise energies in nature, the human dwelling and those who live in it through architecture. He took some time off to answer our questions.

Q: How did you find value in Kerala architecture considering the fact that you were educated outside Kerala and had started to work outside the nation for some time?

Vinod: You could say that my tryst with Kerala architecture happened by pure chance, which I would now like to consider as preordained. In fact, as a young architect, I wanted to build huge flats and buildings that would line the sky in their own distinct styles. However, while working with Mikki Desai in Ahmedabad, I was queried by him on Kerala Architecture, which initiated me to go deeper into Kerala's traditions, customs and beliefs associated with architecture.

The effort exposed me to a wealth of information that has since left me fascinated. I did my own research and fortunately for me, my family, based in Thrissur, helped me to go deeper into the architectural styles and building enhancements that Kerala can boast of. Once I became interested in Kerala, events in my life took me closer to my professional interests. I became associated with a temple documentation project and as if by destiny, became associated with the restoration of the garden and premises of the Sakthan Thampuran Palace in Thrissur. Soon, restoration projects involving the Vadamke Chira in Thrissur and Vadakumnathan Temple followed. The project at the temple is being sponsored by VGK Trust (under TVS motor Company). As I said before, life has been opening up new avenues for me to keep myself involved with Kerala's architecture and I am learning with each new project.

Q: Your profile as an architect is dominated by projects that have tried to restore traditional structures. Has that restricted your chance to showcase unique designs of your own?

Vinod: Definitely not. I have also completed a lot of new designs, which has helped me to bring balance into my career.

I think the restoration works that I have undertaken or coordinated have helped me to develop myself as an architect. It has also helped me personally. Apart from precious professional information and tips that I have received as part of being associated with such projects, they have also helped to develop my understanding about an architect's commitment to society. Through these projects, I get a chance to work with a number of people with whom modern architects normally do not get a chance to work. For example, I have worked with temple workers whose adherence to measurements were strict and religious- the practical need for such measurements were new knowledge to me. I met a mason sometime ago who explained to me the movement of wind through a building, which is again, a rare and fascinating information. I have been fortunate to work with many people with specific skills and the interaction with them has helped me to develop my skills and capacities. On another level, such interactions have also helped me to reach out to more people and assimilate knowledge that seemingly ignorant people, or people with lesser education, possess. To me, each person is a storehouse of ideas and a good architect is one who is sensitive to his/her surroundings, including people. Being able to assimilate good advice from those who are going to be impacted by your creation is a major strength of an architect.

Q: But don't you think that adopting ideas of your clients can create mismatches in your designs?

Vinod: No. In fact, I encourage active participation from my clients. In all the new projects that I have taken up, I have given a lot of consideration for what my clients have to convey to me. It is from their comments and feedback that I design the building for them. I do not approach design with a pre-fabricated plan. It has to evolve with inputs from the architect, the client and nature. Nature speaks when a new creation is being planned and you need to heed to nature if the inhabitants of the building are to live in harmony with each other and nature. A good piece of architecture is not only the outcome of the skills of a good architect- the participation of the client is important as well. If the client is knowledgeable and has a higher level of aesthetic sense, the final creation will also become unique. Else, even if you make the best of your creations for a person, he or she will soon fill it up with out-of-place objects and bad energies that would soon destroy the harmony in the house. Going back to where we began, I must say, a good architectural creation is preordained. When the time is ripe, a good client will meet an apt architect and together they will build a master piece.

Q: You seem to be spiritual in your approach to work...

Vinod: Yes. But spirituality for me is not about a religion or dogma, it is about harmony. Essentially, my job is about harmonising things that I design with things provided by nature and the ideas of the client.

Q: Continuing with what you said on social perspectives, do you think an architect has a role in society beyond building or designing buildings?

Vinod: Yes. In fact, an architect has a bigger role in creating harmony, which is the foundation of a balanced society. Recently, while I was working with danseuse Methil Devika to build a dance hall, my focus was on matching the grace in dance movements with the structure I designed. If the balance is correct, those artists in the building will be impacted positively, which will positively enhance their performance. The vice versa also holds true. The same principle applies in a bigger scale when you design bigger structures. Good structures will enhance the quality of life of the people who come into contact with it, be it a house, a temple, a church, or even a lamp post.

Q: There now seems to be a mad rush for anything that resembles Kerala's architectural styles. How do you analyse this?

Vinod: Kerala's architecture is holistic and comprehensive and it is not restricted to the shape, size or structure of a building. The hallmark of the architecture is simplicity and respect for natural elements. Our ancestors were masters in building structures and they considered a house as the architectural expression of the human body and soul, in sync with nature. Therefore, a house matched the inhabitants, their way of life and even the people with whom they interacted. A house was something that had to be in sync with one's lifestyle and it ideally should not stand out from nature. Even the construction processes and the way the materials for construction were treated were unique. All people, material, activities and phases of construction were revered by the builder and future occupants highlighting the importance of synchronising higher energies with the self. Therefore, the building of a home was a very spiritual process and the people who lived in the house respected and revered nature and natural energies. A house never stood in isolation with nature. It was an ecosystem where each life form in nature, including poisonous snakes, had their own safe realms within the compound. Such benevolence is not seen these days. Today, what would be the point in building a house with a 'Nadumuttam' or a sloping roof if the inhabitants are out of sync with the house and the way it was intended to be? As far as I am concerned, an architect has to match the design of the house with the inhabitants and not simply get carried away by the whims and fancies or trends. As lifestyles change, we need to make buildings that suit the people who live there. Any structure that is not in sync with the inhabitants would create bad energies within the house.

Q: What are the new projects that you undertake other than restoration projects?

Vinod: I have completed a lot of new projects and am undertaking ones that are unique. I have designed the Sripada Dance Kalari in Palakkad, the Water Temple in a forest for the Oneness Group, residences, resorts and many interior projects.

We are to release a new website www.ddarchitects.in soon and my projects are available at www.facebook/ddarchitects

Q: New age architects, especially in foreign nations, are now speaking and practising 'Green' initiatives. Even a significant number of consumers in Kerala insist on green homes. Is there scope for making Kerala architecture green by adhering to the principles that has been passed down through the ages?

Vinod: Perhaps we fail to note that Kerala architecture is green architecture. Typical architectural designs in Kerala always used the power of nature and empowered us to control them while respecting them. The design of windows, hallways and verandas, the treatment of building materials and the intricate and strict measurements involved are all meant to control the energies of the Sun. One thing we need to note is that typical Kerala architecture was never extravagant. Each structure had a function and meaning and the masters of architecture were adept at matching functionality with design. There was nothing without a meaning and nothing was wasted.

Q: What are your other activities aimed for the benefit of architecture?

Vinod: As a former visiting faculty at MES school of Architecture, I plan to develop my office into a design studio, which could develop into a meeting place for architects and designers to develop themselves and their ideas. The office, Design Dreams, which was recently built, has already welcomed people with

diverse skills and we are presently having some students of architecture working on projects related to restoration.

Through Design Dreams we have helped a number of people with unique, but obscure skills to come into the limelight. The restoration work at Vadakumnathan temple is fast developing into a source of pride for the numerous workers who are associated with it.

Thrissur has been the focus of my activities and I am happy that our initiatives in relation with IIA (Indian Institute of Architects) has given Thrissur and Kerala a big push in the domain of architectural thinking. IIA seminars have seen many foreign delegates visiting Thrissur for delivering talks on architecture and development. As the former secretary and the current vice chairman of IIA, Thrissur Centre and and co convenor of INTACH, Thrissur Chapter, I am very happy that the centre's initiative has helped focus attention on Kerala and its architecture.

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