



View of the Sripada Dance Kalari from the street.

setting the stage

Reviving ancient building practices to design a modern temple dedicated to dance and its related art forms, dd architects' Sripada Dance Kalari in Palakkad, Kerala is an aesthetic co-existence of the contemporary and the traditional.

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Images & Drawings: courtesy Vinod Kumar MM, dd architects

The art of dance, it is said, is the incarnation of the highest form of divinity. Perhaps that explains why classical dance has always been associated with the Gods for centuries; an art form truly worthy of the celestial. In India too, classical dance has strong mythical undertones, with Lord Shiva revered as the 'Nataraja' (King of all Dances) who performs the Cosmic Dance that delicately balances life and death over harmonious cycles.

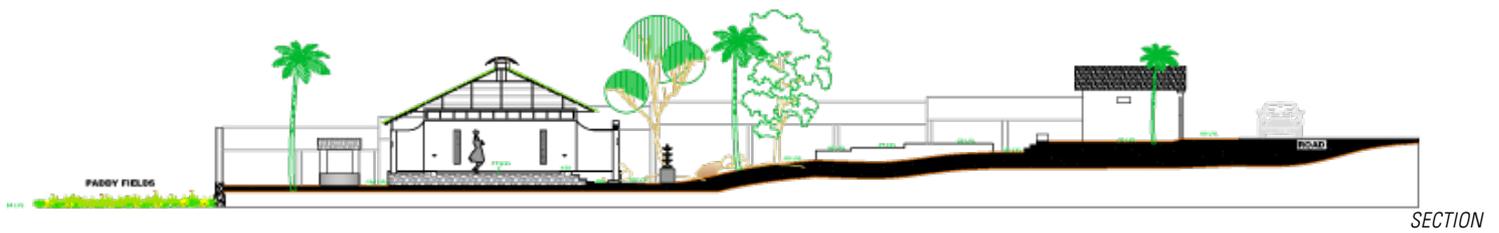
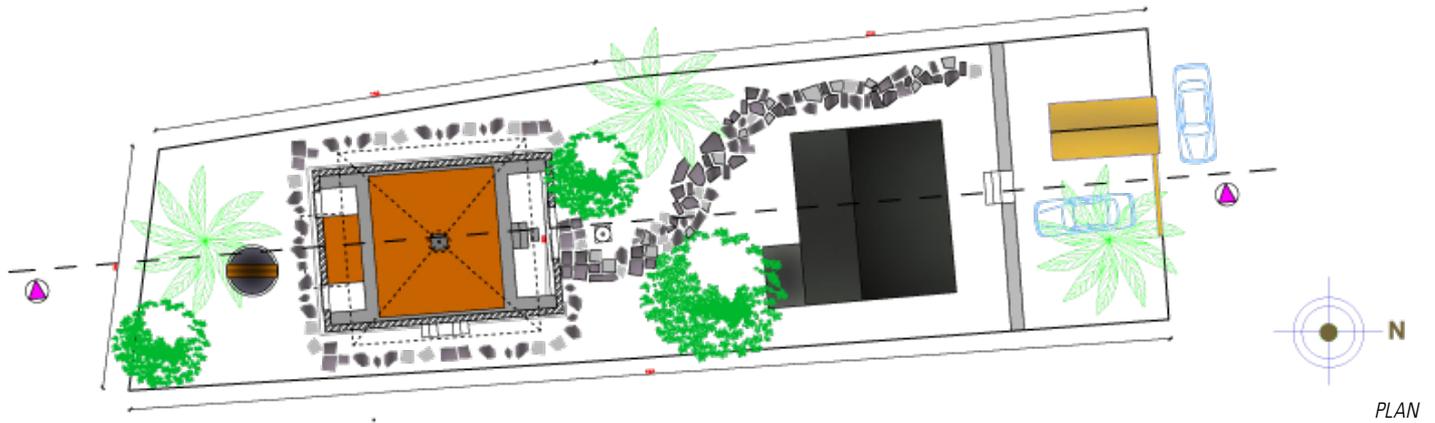
Bharatanatyam, the traditional dance form from Tamil Nadu, is almost 2,000 years old. In Indian mythology, it is believed that Bharatanatyam was revealed by Lord Brahma to Bharata, the sage who compiled the oldest text on stagecraft, the Natya Shastra. He is said to have used words, gestures, music and emotions from the sacred vedas to form the Natyaveda, or the expansive body of knowledge on dance. With such an array of divine, mythical ideas associated with dance, tutelage and learning too is an aspect of worship. Thus, an environment of learning which is worthy of such revered dedication and

conducive to the learning process is essential; the Sripada Dance Kalari is designed to be all that and more.

Materialising from this combination of passion for dance, and the relationship between architecture, space and dance, the Sripada Dance Kalari in Ramanathapuram, Palakkad, Kerala is devoted to the learning and practice of dance and its related art forms. The whole idea is to create a stage, a learning space, worthy of the strong passion that the client and her students, and dancers across the world, have nurtured for the art; a space that resonates with raw energy and pays homage to the traditional architecture of Kerala, as well as reflects the tenets of the Natya Shastra.

On approach, the entry to the Sripada Dance Kalari is marked with a rather inconspicuous entrance gate. A changing room placed close to the entry enables students to change into their dance costumes before they descend down the site, to the dance

The way the architect has imbibed the tenets of the Natya Shastra into the construction process is a symbolic revival of sacred, ancient traditions.



The stone dharmachakra and the prayer lamps at the entrance to the dance hall.



The Kalari stands harmoniously, complemented by nature.



The performance area as viewed from the stone dharmachakra.



The pebbled court leading to the practice stage.



The practice hall, with ample natural light and ventilation.



The musicians' area.



Dedicated to dance, the Kalari is graceful and rhythmic in its look and feel.

hall. The entry to the dance hall is marked with stone lamps, like those at temples, symbolising that the space within is sacred and to be treated with utmost respect. A practice stage is also created in front of the kalari which is actually the foundation of a dilapidated house which was existing in the site. The foundations have been strengthened and restored so that it retains potential for future additions. On entering the structure, a small pebbled court leads to the practice hall. Three small courtyards within the hall as well as a central skylight bring in ample natural light and ventilation; changes in the amount of sunlight create various patterns of light and shade, setting a totally different mood for every performance. The design thus incorporates eco-sensitivity, wherein one can relate to the elements of nature, such as the sun, the rain and the wind that carries the fragrance of the flowering trees in the periphery.

More than just a learning space, the Kalari (literally 'a space for learning' in Malayalam) is intended to be a space for 'self-discovery', which is one of the essential qualities for a 'complete' artiste. Though the design draws inspiration from the traditional architecture of Kerala, it retains a contemporary flavour. The architect elaborates, "As per the Indian concept, a temple represents the human body and is considered to be 'living'. The 'Koothambalam', or the temple theatre, of all Kerala temples is designed following this concept. Thus, the Kalari is an attempt in the modern times to create such a contemporary temple for the practice of Dance." Traditionally, the 'Koothambalams' of temples are designed adhering to the tenets of the Natya Shastra. Similarly, the design of the Kalari

too followed the same; music was played when the foundation stone was laid, Tanjore craftsmen crafted the Dharma Chakra or the wheel of knowledge in the lintel stone, and a mural artist from Guruvayoor added murals on all four cardinal directions as prescribed in the texts. Trees too were planted as per traditional norms. Furthering the symbolism, a copper 'sripada' has been fixed onto the floor in the eastern part of the site. Similarly, the use of basic yet sustainable materials like brick, stone, bamboo and terracotta tiles adds to the contextual flavour of the architecture. However, modern lighting, signage etc. add to the vibrant contemporary ambience of the Kalari.

One might say the architecture is rather usual; the structure blends into the Kerala skyline, since its building materials and methods are very local in their vocabulary. However, what is unusual is the execution; the way the architect has imbibed the tenets of the Natya Shastra into the construction process is a symbolic revival of sacred, ancient traditions. The effortlessness of the contemporary yet purpose-driven space reflects the highest reverence for the art form even in the architecture. ■

FACT FILE:

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| Project | : | Sripada Dance Kalari |
| Location | : | Palakkad, Kerala |
| Architect | : | Vinod Kumar MM, dd architects |
| Design Team | : | Sushil, Irfan, Niji Nataraj. |
| Client | : | Methil Devika |
| Structural Design | : | Santosh VV. |
| Murals | : | Prabeesh |
| Civil Contractors | : | Jayan, Girish, Ravi, Robin |