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- Home
- News
- News Update

Life - People

Life

- Columns
- Life
- Index
- Archives

Features

- Investment World
- eWorld
- Catalyst
- Mentor
- Life
- Canvas
- Praxis
- Urban Pulse
- Brand Quest

Stocks

- Quotes
- SE Diary
- Scoreboard
- Open-End Mutual Fund

Port Info

- Ships in Ports

Archives

- Yesterday
- Datewise
- Resources

Group Sites

- The Hindu
- Business Line
- The Sportstar
- Frontline
- The Hindu eBooks

People's architect

Anupama R

It's important to construct buildings around nature, and not on it, as is the practice today, says this Thiruvananthapuram-based architect who is a passionate promoter of organic architecture.



He is a proponent of green architecture, a believer in Gandhian economics and a fan of Sylvia Plath's poetry. Meet G. Shankar, founder and Chief Architect of the Thiruvananthapuram-based Habitat Technologies, and one of Kerala's busiest architects.

Established in the late 1980s as a rebellious response to architecture that manipulated nature and land, Habitat has grown into a passionate promoter of 'green' or organic architecture, thanks to Shankar's concerted efforts.

In his student days, he was struck by Frank Lloyd Wright's philosophy of organic architecture — that if one were to construct a building on a hill, it should be of it and not on it. He identified with this philosophy that expressed unadulterated concern for nature, as his office built entirely of mud will testify.



Shankar began his career as an architect in the 1980s, at a time when Kerala's architecture was reeling under the sudden rise of the 'Gulf Malayalee' who was investing all his savings in

Stories in this Section

[Child's play](#)

[Allergies are reversible](#)

[Yeh hai Bambai meri jaan!](#)

[Tryst with destiny](#)

[Youth's the flavour this season](#)

[My mother, my friend](#)

[Picturesque Prague](#)

[Magic of Mussourie](#)

[Playing fair](#)

[People's architect](#)

his dream house. Across the State, architects were raising concrete dreams, flattening hills, cutting trees and filling up fields — violating the geographical uniqueness of Kerala's landscape. Instead of building around nature, they were building on it.

It was at this juncture that Shankar felt he had to do something to stop the manipulation of nature, and decided to start promoting green architecture. In those days, the only successful proponent of green architecture was Laurie Baker, an architect whose trademark buildings and homes will always be an indispensable part of Kerala's landscape. Baker was an important source of inspiration for this budding architect. It was from him that he learnt trees were as important as buildings. "Just to save one coconut tree, he used to design the building around it," says Shankar. At the heart of Shankar's green drive lies cost effectiveness. This, he says, is an important step towards energy conservation and particularly important in developing countries, where it makes sense to rely on local or domestic resources.

India, he points out, has an amazing range of locally available building material. "We have got the best mud and lime in the entire world. About 80 per cent of the population live in mud houses, but ironically, there are no standard specifications for earth materials in India. The perception that mud is a poor man's material has to change," he adds.

Instead of building with such traditional materials it was meaningless to turn to plastic and glass. Unless we find pride in our resources and traditional idioms, there is no future for India, feels Shankar.

A good example of the traditional methods in Kerala's architecture is the concept of the *nadumuttam* or the central open courtyard. Almost all old houses in Kerala had a *nadumuttam* that allowed the women of the house a glimpse of the blue sky above. Besides its social significance, this was also a climatological device that allowed hot air to escape and cooled the house. Shankar tries his best to incorporate this concept into his houses.

Use of material such as mud also has another advantage — lower transport costs. He thinks this makes immense sense rather than bringing to Kerala marble all the way from Rajasthan. Shankar strongly propagates the Gandhian ideal of identifying and using resources from within five km of the house.

However, few people feel the same way and that is probably why building a house has become such a strain today. Shankar says this was not the case with our ancestors to whom building a house was a pleasurable exercise. But today the yardstick for most people is "the neighbour's house". It is in such situations that the architect has to take on the role of a teacher and educate people on the feasibility of the materials used and resources that lie within reach, he adds.

'People' is an important word in Shankar's dictionary. People-friendly architecture has always been his dream. "Poor people need architects too... they too must have access to technology," he says. As part of this initiative, he has built toilets and homes for fishermen, and the under-privileged. It is this commitment that won him the title 'People's Architect'.

But the road this far has not been smooth and he has had to pay the price for being different from other architects. "Do

architects build toilets?" he asks, as he recalls how he has been isolated from the fraternity and even assaulted once. When he first started out as an architect in Thiruvananthapuram there were no takers for his style of architecture and he had to wait eight months for his first assignment. He did 13 buildings in 1987, while now he does at least three a day!

Today, his responsibilities as a people's architect have grown. An important part of this role is being sensitive to a community's culture and ethos. For instance, when he built a housing society in Orissa, each of those families insisted on a *puja* room. This was the cultural individuality he had to respect and include in his construction. He believes architecture must be suited to a place climatically and socially. For this reason, a house in Tamil Nadu will be different from one in Kerala.

Another meaningful part of Shankar's responsibility has been establishing the 'Habitat Women's Initiative'. He feels strongly about the inequalities women labourers face on the work front where they are often exploited and paid lower wages for tough labour. He organised a training programme in concrete frame-making for some women in Thiruvananthapuram. With an investment of about Rs 1 lakh, he then helped them set up a co-operative society to manufacture concrete frames. The initiative was such a success that the women paid the capital back in a month! This unit has been replicated for unwed mothers in Wyanad as well. Shankar beams with pride when he proclaims how a group of tired and battered women look happy and confident now, thanks to the Habitat Initiative.

The largest NGO in the shelter sector, Habitat today has projects in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and across India. It has to its credit thousands of houses, besides institutions, commercial complexes, tourist resorts, townships and hospitals. There are many buildings in Gujarat and Orissa, all using disaster-resistant technology. But Shankar feels he has a long way to go and is now working towards a movement that will promote sustainable and cost-effective architecture. Establishing a training centre would help a great deal. He wants this philosophy to live on even after his or Baker's time. "We're only the forerunners," he says. His ultimate dream for the future is a Habitat commune where people dream, work, live and die together.

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