

VISION Kerala

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M.M. Hassan: A name synonymous with the welfare of NRKs
Kerala Architecture - Through the corridors of a glorious heritage
Yellow Metal: Always luring Malayali minds

Managing Editor

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Photographers

KS Sajan

Haris Kormath

Manoj Vasudevan

Designer

Byju M Devan

Head Office

First Floor TC 9/1464 B 15

Temple Road Sasthamangalam

Thiruvananthapuram 10 Kerala

Tel/Fax: 91-471- 2722328

www.visionkerala.com

Editorial Queries

editor@visionkerala.com

Marketing Queries

info@visionkerala.com

Other Offices

UK: 80 Bradwell Road Bradville

Milton Keynes Bucks MK137AD England

Tel: 0044 1908 225847

Fax: 0044 1908 322154

Germany: Maistr 30 80337 Munich

Germany Tel: 0049 89 13936200

Fax: 0049 89 533824

Mob: 00491607945760

Singapore (Address of the

Correspondent): Blk 103 Spottiswoode

Park Road #22-102 Singapore 080103

Mumbai: 6/7 Gundecha Chambers Ground

Floor Nagindas Master Road

Fort Mumbai 400 023

Tel: +91 22 5635 5944

Chennai: 6/ Ratnammal Street

Rangarajapuram Chennai 600 024

Tel: +91 44 24844122, 23726513

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MESSAGES

It gives me great pleasure to gather that a new magazine titled VISION KERALA is being launched to cater to the needs of Non-Resident Keralites. I send my good wishes for the success of VISION KERALA.



Chief Minister of Kerala



I am happy to learn that a new publication 'Vision Kerala' is being brought out from Thiruvananthapuram with the objective of focusing on the NRKs. It is indeed a salutary venture especially because of the scarcity of this kind journal to take up the cause of the Keralites living abroad. In these days of stiff competition for survival any publication has to strive hard to earn a reputation and a place in the hearts of the readers. I am hopeful that persons behind 'Vision Kerala' would take up the responsibility to make this a journal of public acceptance.



M. M. Hassan

Minister for Information and Parliamentary Affairs, Govt. of Kerala

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Word
Splash

“I don't bother comedians imitating me in television programmes. Even though I don't watch the programmes, I have no complaints. Criticisms should come more when I hold the position of Chief Minister. Criticisms have some qualities.” – Chief Minister A.K. Antony in response to the controversy regarding the portrayal of politicians as disreputable figures in comedy programmes.

“People of Kerala have the capacity to recognize the true spirit of politicians who work for them, even if they are portrayed as comical characters. I don't have any grudges in depicting me as a comical character.” – Opposition leader V.S. Achuthanandan, in response to the 'politician in comedy show' issue.

“My re-entry into films should be more fruitful. I've experienced the dynamic phases of life. Today I'm a wife, a mother and a grandmother... I believe that now my characters would be better than those I did before.” – Yesteryear heroine Sheela, on her re-entry into Malayalam cinema.

“Malayalis have not imbibed communism in its truest spirits. They are slaves of a fantasy world about it – ignorant, blind... We have seen the original face of communism. We have experienced its bitterness for 40 years. So, praising communism is a sin. You should imbibe truth in place of misunderstandings at least now.” – Well-known Polish director Krzysztof Zanussi who was in Thiruvananthapuram in connection with the 8th International Film Festival of Kerala.

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Majestic, glorious, divine... the accolades for Kerala's traditional architecture keep coming in. Old mud structures with thatched or tiled roofs, spacious well-ventilated rooms and the aroma of nature from walls and floors plastered with cow dung — all enunciate the legacy of the land. Vast yards or 'thirumuttams' with a variety of medicinal plants acted as a 'guard' while traditional structures such as the 'nalukettu' and the 'ettukettu' with beautiful carvings in wood and fine polished floors embodied the magnificence of our Vaasthu influenced heritage.

So is present-day Kerala losing the elegance once held high by architects like the legendary Perumthachan? Do huge concrete buildings and flats reflect the changing architectural concepts of the Malayali? Why do we merely rush after Western culture? Are we compelled to follow modern technologies? Are we bound to accept anything offered to us? The questions are as numerous and varied as the answers.

"Mere aping of western forms had a bad

influence on the traditional form all over the state. The constructions that came up after that still remain as wounds on the face of Kerala architecture", laments G. Shankar, Chief Architect, Habitat Technology Group in Thiruvananthapuram. "Structures that maintain the rhythm, harmony, balance, proportion and unity are few today. Attitudes vary from person to person and traditional architecture spontaneously followed these basic attitudes. It didn't have even a simple factor that caused discomfort", he explains.

The old houses and other buildings responded equally well to the environmental and social climate of the state and were in tune with the social scenario that prevailed at the time, says Shankar. "One can even learn about the social status of a particular family by seeing the type of house they resided in," he declares.

Kerala Architect

A renaissance in the ma



Equally important is the fact that traditional architecture is based on principles that are the result of hundreds of years of research and development, he explains. Its form and structure please the eye and soothe the body, Shankar adds. He points to the quality of building material used in traditional structures as an example of this philosophy. Similarly, these buildings were swathed in the fragrance of the earth, from floors that were coloured and polished with herbal extracts. Chemicals were unheard of in constructions, he adds.

Similarly, traditional architecture never deformed the earth in any way, with *Vaasthu Shashtra* insisting on constructions that were in balance with the environment. This is evident from buildings preserved in many places in Kerala. For instance, houses in the State's coastal areas, plains and hilly areas have been built using different methods and materials that suit the temperament of the land. In the past it was even a practice

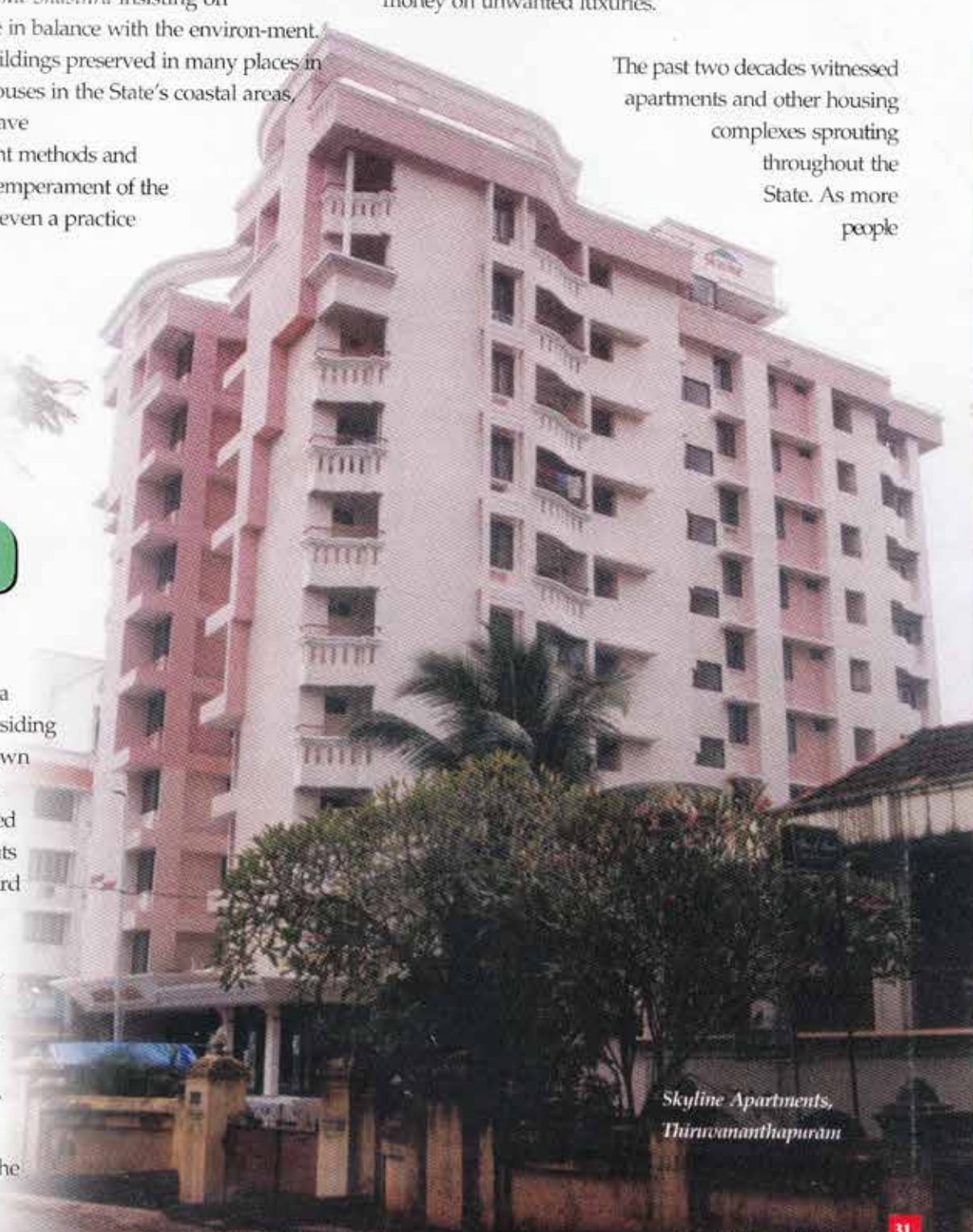
'Modernisation' of architecture crept into the State in the early 1920s when the material vocabulary changed. A mixture of lime and sand used for construction gave way to cement, while bricks also found a place in building technology signaling a major change. Wood, the basic building material, became expensive and unaffordable to the common man.

In the 1970s, Kerala architecture became a victim of western influences. Glass and plastic began to extensively creep into constructions. And by the 1980s, constructing a house became another way of spending money on unwanted luxuries.

The past two decades witnessed apartments and other housing complexes sprouting throughout the State. As more people

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to seek permission from a tree and the creatures residing on it before cutting it down for the construction of a house. It was also believed that some trees and plants if planted in the front yard would add to the safety of the house. A 'neem' tree and a 'thulasi' were thus essential elements of any front yard. "They add beauty, and are pleasing to the eyes too," says Shankar about the significance of green in the house.



*Skyline Apartments,
Thiruvananthapuram*



moved to urban areas, apartments became a convenient option. "Though many are not wholeheartedly willing to reside in flats, they are compelled to do so as the circumstances demand," opines S. Biju, a Civil Engineer who has been in the field for the past six years. Villas that

drew a feature or two—sloping, tiled roofs or extensive woodwork—from the traditional style of architecture have also started appearing in the scene. However, traditional architecture styles are slowly starting to reappear, but money and



unavailability of essential materials are major constraints. Still, many people are choosing to go completely traditional. "There is a comparative increase in the demand for houses built in the traditional form," says Shankar.

Similarly, contemporary techniques that ensure low cost and energy are gaining momentum. "The technology is

eco-friendly as well as people-friendly," says Sajan, Joint Director of COSTFORD (Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development), a voluntary organisation working to empower the poorer and weaker sections of society.

Influenced by the vision of its creators such as the late C. Achutha Menon and Laurie Baker, who is its current Chairman, COSTFORD is at the forefront of the efforts to spread the message of saving energy during the construction process. "We should insist on maximum utilisation of available materials rather than those which are not re-usable," suggests Sajan adding that he is concerned about the excessive use of non-reusable materials, including concrete.

Another trend that has gripped the State is the advent of low-cost housing options. The idea is gaining popularity — winning both hearts and purses. Such constructions are affordable and use locally available materials. Cost-effective, eco-friendly technology is the key in low cost houses.

Initially, people were not ready to welcome such houses, suspecting their longevity. Now, more and more people are welcoming these pocket-friendly homes. Ordinary tiles, coconut shells and mud form the materials for such constructions. "The significance of using mud as a building material is that it can be reshaped into any form after years, according to the style prevailing then. The same mud can be used without wastage," declares Sajan.

Kerala's unique style of architecture has come a long way over years. Wooden walls and tiled roofs have given way to brick walls and concrete roofs. And though there is much more to be done, the essence of the state's architectural traditions is beginning to reassert itself in the work of some of Kerala's finest architects.

YAMINI M.V.

Photographs: **HABITAT, HARIS KORMATH**



G. SHANKAR
Architect

