

# Breaking through the conventional barriers

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**S**tones, woodwork, terracotta tiles, and the classic red brick never looked so beautiful. And if you get your dream home or office made of these materials, at a cost that will leave you smiling, then there's nothing like it. That's exactly what RL Kumar, who runs the Centre for Vernacular Architecture (CVA) in Banaswadi, Bangalore promises to deliver. Not being an architect was never a handicap for Kumar, who formed a co-operative of construction workers to undertake building projects in 1987. His centre builds homes, offices and institutional buildings by using locally available materials and traditional building techniques. Their designs are not just climatically applicable, but are also culturally relevant and cost-effective.

"Many universities in India and abroad have a subject called vernacular architecture. The crisis being, there are no text books, no teachers, and no one knows what vernacular architecture is," says Kumar. He feels that as sustainable development is gaining currency, we need something called sustainable architecture that aims to minimise resource utilisation. Also because of the carbon credit certification, the concept of green buildings has come to the fore.

But, why vernacular? Kumar says: "Architecture, like cooking and weaving, can't exist in a vacuum. It has to exist as part of a tradition. When you say green building, nobody associates with it. Same is the case with sustainable architecture, which is an imported term."

The green buildings and sustainable architecture are referred to as unconventional alternatives to the traditional form of architecture in the country. In a nutshell, it's the difference between home-cooked food and fast food. This, he believes should capture the definition of vernacular.

Laurie Baker, an unconventional builder's work combined with Kumar's own ongoing questioning of modernity, inspired him to explore the many facets of his passion.

Kumar feels that the terms 'green' and 'eco-friendly' overshadow vernacular, and calls the english-speaking indians 'a bunch of idiots' who prefer to eat with a spoon and fork, when they can use their hands. The 'middle-class indian' has become an outsider in his own land is what he feels.

They don't use any sub-contractors. They design and build themselves. He asserts that vernacular architecture is very affordable and certainly 25-30 per cent cheaper than other forms of architecture, though a cost plus contract is important.

He, however, also maintains that this kind of architecture should not be cheap. "Why should it be? You pay for beauty and beauty doesn't come cheap," he says.

The good news is that you don't need to be an architect to work at the CVA. All you need is 'intelligence' and a zeal for anything vernacular. "People who work with me are the ones who come in search of me and who want to know about vernacular architecture," says Kumar.