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Hand-made homes

Trained craftsmen use ancient methods to build these less-than-perfect but charming homes. Lakshmi Krupa visits the Centre for Vernacular Architecture to find out more

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Thatched roof and stone walls at a home in Kolar

A visionary in the field of traditional building methods, the late R.L. Kumar was working on housing for the poor in slums when he met Laurie Baker. Inspired by Baker's contribution towards local architecture, Kumar, not a trained architect himself, set up the Centre for Vernacular Architecture (CVA) in Bangalore, "a co-operative of building craft

persons” with architectural practices that promote “the use of locally available material, traditional building techniques, culturally and climatically relevant building design”.

“He didn’t study architecture formally, and I think that’s why he was able to approach it very differently,” says Chennai-based Goutam Seetharaman, who is both a trustee as well as a principal architect of the Centre. “When we study architecture we look at a lot of Western building technologies. And in India, our focus is limited to temples and large heritage structures. We do not study how our people have been building homes; using local material like mud, stones and thatch.”

Today, CVA’s home-building methods are among the most cost-effective, while still keeping in mind tastes and budgets of the owners. “It’s a time consuming process and that is why large-scale builders can’t get into it. They are under pressure to complete a project soon and move on. At the Centre, we are trying to revive not just indigenous ways of building homes but we also look to provide job opportunities to traditional workers”. If a brick wall is laid perfectly using time-tested methods, it doesn’t need putty or even a coat of paint. “We want to help people live in homes that remind them of their grandparents’ house,” says Seetharaman, pointing out that soon even making and fitting windows will be lost crafts. “Everything is retro-fitted these days and we want to bring the old, traditional ways of building a home back.”

Vernacular homes make the most of the space and the resources available locally. Using load-bearing walls, stone foundations, laterite and even random rubble as building material, such homes are meant for people who are not looking to move into cookie-cutter homes designed by someone else.

Of course, a vernacular home comes with its own set of challenges, like wooden doors that tend to expand and contract according to the season, or tiles that might leak for a few seasons. However, there are other advantages. If you choose an exposed brick wall, there is no hassle of re-painting, and with re-used doors and window panels, all with their own old-worldly charm, there is no need to add polish. The architect sources doors, window frames and furniture, all refurbished, from Karaikudi and Pondicherry. “There are some small issues that people are willing to overlook because it is the imperfections that make these homes beautiful,” explains Seetharaman. “In the olden days, carpenters would season

wood, exposing it to the vagaries of weather for two or three years before working on it. Today, this sort of time is a luxury that very few can afford.”

The architects from the Centre also build long-term relationships with clients and fix any problems they may have in the house over the years. Lovejit Visvesh, whose home in Neelankarai was built by the Centre says, “I did not know anything about vernacular architecture. But I told Goutam, our architect, that I wanted a home that would take me as close to nature as possible. Now our home has a very coastal feel to it... a laterite structure with rocks and natural grass and coconut wood doors!” she says. The Mangalore tiles, a water body inside the house, and the cool colours of the interiors, all remind one of a getaway far from the madding city life. “It’s like living in a resort!” she adds. Built over a 6,000 sq. ft in Salem, Natesan Subramanian’s farmhouse is a sparkling example of the Centre’s ability to build over a large space. “We have only natural stones and nothing artificial,” he adds, “We have always loved antique and all things old and now our home too looks like an antique piece,” says Subramanian.

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