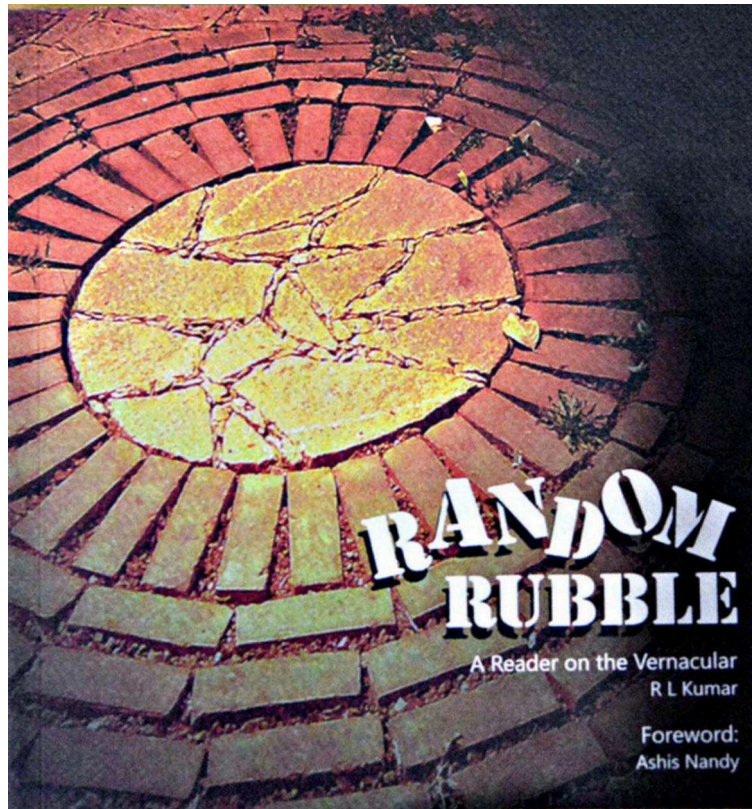


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Inspiringly vernacular

R.L. Kumar focused on a style that depended on the grounded skills of artisans that had been learnt through generations and not through formal training. By **NANDHINI SUNDAR**

Published – June 19, 2015 10:24 pm IST



Karnataka Bengaluru 19/06/2015 . Cover page of the book Random Rubble in Bengaluru . Photo Bhagya Prakash K

He was not an architect, that is, not in the technical sense. But in his spirit, he was undoubtedly one in totality. As for being an activist and a philosopher, it would not be wrong to say that it was the evolution of his penchant to rebel with the norms, his experimentation with the unconventional and exploring beyond the well-worn path.

A Chartered Accountant by qualification, late R.L. Kumar was an architect who moved away from conventional practices and decided to chart his own course and design, dipping into the traditional soul of the soil, giving vernacular architecture a new lease of life by recreating in entirety its beauty and virtues of environmental sensitivities, in a modern scenario. Kumar's substantial work done through Centre for Vernacular Architecture Trust that he had founded, bears ample testimony to his philosophy and design sentiments.

To commemorate Kumar on his third death anniversary, the Centre for Vernacular Architecture Trust organised a film on Kumar's ideas and designs along with release of a book with his essays, "Random Rubble: A Reader on the Vernacular." The book aims to generate reading material on the conceptual underpinnings of vernacular architecture which currently has a dearth of good reference material.

Introducing the book, architect Himanshu Burte from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences spoke at length on Kumar's work and his design inclinations. Referring to his built work as being warm, energising, almost poetic in structure, Burte contended that "this streak was also very much present in our traditional architecture." According to him, though Kumar's work was not completely accomplished in the sense of perfect craftsmanship, "it was universally inspiring where he produced spaces that you instantly connected with". He further added, "What marked his legacy apart is his capability to produce this architecture as a critical thinker who did not take in the socio-political scenario that you build in. He was critical to see architecture as a process, through a commitment to uncover injustice. He was a self-critic, critical about being transformational in vision. His designs are rooted not in the gratification of ego of an artist but an act that addressed the requirements of the person finally inhabiting the space. This was the key dimension of his creativity".

Ashis Nandy, political psychologist, social theorist, critic and former Director of CSDS, reflected on the architectural traditions, the political philosophy and Kumar's life from these perspectives. Prof. Nandy opined that Kumar was a philosopher of a discipline where art and science converged "as he had interest in both and architecture emerged as a self-expression."

Stating that Kumar was certainly not a fanatic environmentalist, Nandy felt that his decision to become a vernacular architect "was more political than environment. He was

rebellious against conventional architecture and knowledge and vernacular architecture was an offshoot of this.”

According to him, Kumar focused on a style that depended on the grounded skills of artisans that had been learnt through generations and not through formal training, creating an awareness of their skills that were dying because of lack of use.

“He acknowledged and celebrated this difference of lack of formal training, his architecture creating a community where the humble artisan carrying a tradition through memory passed from generations became an integral part”, added Nandy.

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