

Group housing: A way of living with nature and friends



A view of a dwelling in the group housing scheme (Above). A view of a veranda (Right)

By R S RANJEETHA URS

In the interiors of Kengeri, on the outskirts of Bangalore, one can see several houses spread across three acres of land in the midst of canopied trees, quite unperturbed by the usual city noises. Things seem to unfold here at an altogether different pace and have its own rhythm!

This is the 'Good Earth' project, a brain child of Jeeth Iype, an architect and a couple of his like minded friends, who were aspiring to live in an eco-friendly environment.

Jeeth Iype is inspired by the philosophy of Laurie Baker, an eco-friendly architect and engineer, popularly known as the "brick master of Kerala" and believes in the importance of group living and creating

sustainable communities.

Why group housing?

"When one is young, one hardly gives much thought about living together in a group. But as one embarks on a family life, especially with children at home, the need for community living is felt in our lives. This need is all the more poignant now, as nuclear families have become the norm of the day," says Jeeth Iype.

"It is this need for social security in our lives, that prompted a group of us friends to come forth and create Good Earth, a community guided by the need to live in an environment-friendly and sustainable neighbourhood. The need to be in a community that one can identify with is very essential," he underlines.

These communities can be formed around natural associations, like a group of

childhood friends, colleagues, alumni of an institution, couple of relatives or so. The natural group around which 'Good Earth' is formed is the parents of children studying at Centre For Learning (CFL), an alternative school. "Being surrounded with like-minded people is a priceless feeling!" he explained.

The communities can be broken down into smaller groups of 25 to 50 families at the most. And a mix of all kinds of people, the older and younger generation, would make for an ideal group of friends. These kinds of smaller communities would enable one to express oneself and shape one's true identity. It is a reflection of a larger concept of joint family, he added.

"So, in the year 2003, we pooled in our resources and bought three acres of land on the outskirts of Banga-

lore, Kengeri. An acre then cost around Rs 30 lakh. The whole project has been designed for 25 families, but at present only ten families are residing here," he explained.

Good Earth

Talking about their home and also the idea behind the creation of 'Good Earth' project, the architect couple Natasha and Jeeth Iype say that the underlying philosophy of Good Earth is basically the rejuvenation of the traditional system of group living.

"It should be a verandah with a house attached to it. The house should not be too large but yet be spacious and easy to maintain. The house should revolve around one large informal space, which would be the heart of the home, where all of us, including friends and family would hang out.

These were some of the ideas that were brewing in our minds and that which we wanted to see translated into reality", says Natasha.

Also, greater thought has gone into the materials employed for construction. In this regard the couple have been guided by the long-standing philosophy of making optimum use of locally available material. Their home, built around 3,000 square feet, uses a lot of brick, stone, jungle wood, terracotta, Mangalore tiles, which are all locally available materials. So a lot of design was built around them. The materials that one uses should speak for itself. The home should reflect the true personalities of the people who reside in it, said Jeeth.

Eco friendly

Moreover, terracotta tiles help maintain room temperature and hence it is good for arthritis. Jungle wood is not that expensive, so these materials are used in abundance in the project, he added.

Also, the basic quality of the materials like bricks and stones used in construction, has been retained. As we understand, the beauty of the materials should be enhanced with minimum interference. The primary quality, natural colour, texture and form of the material should not be concocted, he underlined.

"Our house is oriented to a private rear courtyard, facing northeast, walled with a mosaic of rubble and mud plaster, with the tree as the focus. The walled courtyard was a response to the need for a courtyard, which is easier to maintain as compared to an internal courtyard. We kept the bedrooms basic, indulging in an attic in the children's room and a closet in our room. Our bathroom faced one of the trees, so we planned to have a walled terrace, so that we could enjoy the tree from the bath, which eventually evolved

into a built - in bathtub," said Natasha. "We should build around nature and develop the philosophy of working with nature. If you can go along with nature, you can go a long way," said Jeeth. The land upon which we build the house, should dictate the mode and the kind of materials to be used for construction. One should look at the land and grow along with it and not try to build on a clean slate of land, by making the land bereft of its natural resources be it rocks, trees, natural ponds etc he explained.

"We started building with a basic plan, and a clear understanding of the language we were going to use - exposed bricks and 'chappadi' stones. There was also some clarity on a minimalist look - no orna-

mental brick work," she emphasised. However, a lot of the details evolved on the site, in collaboration with the masons and their skill, contributing immensely to the work. The woodwork, in the roof too was worked out with the carpenters. Their expression of the vernacular often contradicted our "controlled ornamentation," she underlined.

Finally, the house was completed in one and a half years' time. However, the finishes were the most debated upon, in terms of practicality versus 'look and feel.' Slate and sandstone in the bathrooms took precedence over ceramic and granite. Bathroom walls were painted with polyurethane paint, as opposed to tiles. The kitchen uses granite top and terracotta mural tiles on the

walls except for the cooking area, which is clad with a slab of teak stone, yellow oxide with slate inlays in the verandah and blue oxide in the bathtub," she recounts. "A home is not just a place where you eat, sleep and work, it is a place where you live. So one should add real value to their home, as one lives there for the rest of their life.

Expensive marble floors cannot bring one happiness, but a good night's sleep and the chirping of the birds that greets you when you wake up in the wee hours of the morning, is what can bring about true joy into your life. These were some of the aspects that we wanted to incorporate in our living and we have been able to accomplish this in our project as well," concludes Jeeth Iype.

