

Christopher Benninger and Vidarbha

Noted Institutional Architect Prof. Christopher Benninger passed away last week in Pune. Much was talked about his links with Ahmedabad and Pune. But for more than two decades he had a very strong connect with Vidarbha.

He was involved with Naglok, a Buddhist retreat at Nagpur for god alone knows how long. But his continuing tryst with Wardha and Nagpur began in 2007 and continued till he died.

We had started a Bajaj Science Center at Wardha in 2007. It was located in a 1,000 sq. ft. hall of a public library, but in a 6 acre plot.

We were looking for a Pune based architect for it. Pune, because Shri Rahul Bajaj and I were both based there. As with any idea, Shri Bajaj, delegated its execution to whosoever came up with it. So, it fell to my lot to find an Architect. I met several who had done educational buildings. In the course of this search I found CCBA via Google.

Christopher said he found peace at Wardha. I said he could have the peace in return for a good design. To put his money where his mouth was, he agreed to do it for a ridiculously low sum of Rs 15 Lacs, which even included travel expenses.

Christopher was in love with curved ceilings and he went for them in the Science Center. But there were miscalculations and they became too heavy. So we had to support the roof from the outside with columns.

A red brick (from Allahabad) structure, it has space, inside and outside in the verandahs and is a truly an uplifting place to be in. It was inaugurated by Dr Raghunath Mashelkar in 2009. And was the basis of Dr Anil Kakodkar's concept of a Science Center in each district in Maharashtra. Set in a verdant garden, it is a complex that grows on one.

The Science Center, in Barapatre's , an ex-World Bank consultant based in Wardha, words was the first piece of modern architecture in Wardha.

After this he designed the Bajaj Bhavan at GS College, Nagpur to house its MBA program. Within the limits of lack of space, this too is an attractive 3 storied structure, with signature Christopher elements like openings in the walls to let in light and air.

But the best was to come, the Bajaj Institute of Technology at Wardha, now a 350,000 sq. ft. complex set in 15 acres of land. Its phase 2 of hostel and faculty residences are still under construction and would be completed in 2025-26.

We realised soon enough that to get the best of Christopher, one had to give him the space requirements and a budget and then leave him alone. The only design input we gave him was that we wanted the buildings to open into an "Aangan" or plaza, something we had been doing in our other buildings. And we converted the steps into the plaza into a large stage. Beyond these insignificant inputs, the complex is all Christopher's.

We never realised that we were doing something unusual, but Christopher was generous with us with his time and talent, because he said his other clients interfered too much with

his designs and did not execute them quickly. And he got on marvelously with Shri Bajaj, which was not an unusual thing. Rahul Bajaj was a person one got along marvelously.

What came out is bold and breath taking. A plaza flanked by classrooms and labs, enveloped in a continuous wall broken by giant triangles. And a high ceiling entrance flanked by a tower that soars 5 stories high.

Function and form complement each other. The triangular tower houses water tanks! The dual passageways linking the classrooms reduce the temperature in the hallway by 4 degrees. With a summer of 45 plus, this is a huge relief. And the curved ceilings of these passages go on for over 200 metres reminding one of the long passages in the great temples of Tamil Nadu. An educational institution as a temple of learning!

The design has won an award but more than that won the heart of all of us who occupy the buildings. One has to only look at the photographs of the complex that students have put up on the internet.

We had cost over runs but Shri Rahul Bajaj had a blank cheque for Wardha and he knew we had only miscalculated and implemented Christopher's ideas, so he never made an issue of it. And at Rs 3,000 per square feet it was still a reasonable cost.

Christopher and I rarely discussed his designs but chit chatted about broader issues, after our meeting with his design team. He had a wealth of anecdotes about his life in India, his interactions with global and Indian architects. His office-cum -house, aptly called India House was lined with photographs of Architecture's greats. One of his insights was that if you put together two middle class Indians together, then in five minutes they would find a common acquaintance!

His insightful book "Letters to a young architect" is a must read. In my copy he wrote "It has been a pleasure building Bajaj buildings with you". Pleasure indeed!

There are his preliminary designs of the school that we intend to start. The centre of which is an auditorium dedicated to Shri Rahul Bajaj and a pinnacle to remind one of the Temple at Konarak.

RIP Christopher. Your buildings will live on and continue to please and inspire.

