IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

One of India’s most highly decorated and respected architects, Christopher Charles Benninger studied urban planning at MIT and architecture at Harvard where he later taught. He settled in India in 1971, and has since then founded a studio that only works on projects involving study, analysis and exploration of visual, spatial, formal, social and technological ideas, and concepts related to architecture, urbanism and human settlements. All his projects address the complex issues of design, context, climate, materials, sustainability, and technology, amid the client’s programmatic needs.

One of the six recipients of the Great Master Architect Award presented every three years, Prof. Benninger recently released his award-winning book Letters To A Young Architect. The master architect pens this special piece for Insite, revealing how his childhood influenced his design philosophy, his love for architecture, and his journey as a master designer.

PHOTOS COURTESY: Christopher Charles Benninger Architects

My mother and father were of French and Czech origin respectively. My father held a Ph D in economics and pursued a career as a university professor. I suppose this led me to focus on studies and teaching. Apart from working in studios, I pursued postgraduate degrees and began my career teaching in Harvard’s Graduate School of Design at about the age of 26. I became a tenured Assistant Professor by 28; that was when B.V. Doshi asked me to come back to India, to initiate the School of Planning. I had been a Fulbright Fellow with Doshi as a youth, and we shared a common urge to start a school of planning.

As a boy I spent my spare time hiking, cycling and camping, bringing me close to nature. Thus, there is a thread weaving my life into a fabric and giving me meaning in what I do. I feel my childhood engaged me with a love for nature and imbibed many idealistic and utopian concepts into my thinking. I grew up believing each one of us can “design ourselves,” and that, together, right-thinking people can design a new culture that respects and builds on all communities and on the fragile eco-system.

How did I discover that the profession of design was my calling? As a boy, my aunt presented me with a copy of The Natural House by Frank Lloyd Wright. From the moment I picked that book up, I was lured by Wright’s truth. I read it cover-to-cover in one sitting, turning pages through the night, until the early morning. I suppose, I have never put that book down, not even today.
The Beginning

I completed an undergraduate degree in architecture at the University of Florida, where my father was also teaching economics and accounting systems. Gainesville was a small utopian settlement with a huge library and university at its centre, laced with ponds, lakes, gardens, forests, with avenues and boulevards stretching out into the wilderness full of exotic birds, colourful flowers, alligators, snakes and beautiful insects. Life was idyllic and contemplative. Many artists like Jerry Uelsmann, the famous photographer; Robert Frost, the poet laureate of America; and thinkers like Howard Odum, the environmentalist; lived and walked under the trees of this small community. Gainesville in winter was heaven for the finer things of the mind! There were painters working on canvases in their garages, and writers peering over their typewriters out of their windows. Archie Carr carried out his famous “turtle studies,” and Ross Allen’s reptile park interested us in nature. We boys explored great swamps in canoes and walked through vast forests where we camped in tents we carried on our backs. We spent summers at Free Acres, our ancestral house in the Watchung Mountains just 50km out of Manhattan, or in our “Uncle’s” 42nd-floor apartment on top of the Waldorf Astoria when he was Ambassador to the United Nations. New York immersed me in a global way of thinking, with the likes of Adlai Stevenson, Barbara Ward, Sir Robert Jackson, Marietta Tree, and so many other luminaries. I think the idea of living in a foreign country got into my head, sitting and listening to my elders talk about world development and social change.

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famous musicians like Aaron Copland just ahead of one in the checkout line to pay for milk, or Julia Child living next door, while we watched her on television teaching cooking. My career was really hard work, but it was the ambience of intellectualism, and the milieu of great people all around that inspired me to do something different and hopefully better.

Philosophy and Influences

My philosophy grew out of the practice of architecture and needing “beginning points” to catalyse my thinking. I believe the “truth of architecture” lies in a few “beginning points.” These are: (1) the site and its context; (2) the client’s Brief; (3) the local geo-climatic conditions; and (4) the technological situation (materials available, skills of craftsmen, and appropriate technologies). The way craftsmen assemble the materials into my shapes and forms are crucial, as one has to change for them, and not the other way around! I think one has to begin thinking after analysing these beginning points. Then in realising that these “truths”
are places to start thinking, one can begin building options and analysing them. Too many designers start their thinking with a predetermined shape, style or iconic form. This leads to confusion and bad architecture.

Frank Lloyd Wright taught me about organic architecture that flows from nature; he taught me about honesty of expression and the expression of materials in their true forms and colours. Sert invented the field Urban Design, when he founded the first urban design course in 1956 at Harvard and his sensitivity of the urban fabric affected all of us around him. Meeting Charles and Ray Eames, Phillip Johnson, Paolo Solari, Margaret Mead, Buckminster Fuller, and so many others set a clear bar of achievement that one must reach. My life was really all about people! It was people who inspired me and set me on a path. It was people who made me question things, and who made me think. It was my teachers who gave me a mission in life, and who pushed me out into the vast unknown to fly on my own. As I have always said, “The best luck in life is to have great teachers.”

CCBA and its Journey
In 1996, Ramprasad and I set up Christopher Charles Benninger Architects in a small apartment called Melody. By 2000, we shifted into a small cottage, and, by 2007, we were here in India House, our own complex. The beginning years were like a family, there were financial constraints and our projects were relatively smaller. We had time to mull over options and solutions, and it was a beautiful, creative time. I supposed those slower years prepared us for the big challenges ahead that came in the form of the Capitol of Bhutan, Samundra Institute of Maritime Studies,
the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and Suzlon One Earth. These large projects helped us set up procedures to handle still larger projects like the Indian Institute of Technology in Hyderabad, the Forbes Marshall Industrial Park, the Azim Premji University and the Lodha township in Pune. Each has been a learning stage to build the succeeding stage!

When I began my formal practice 16 years ago, India was still not within the mainstream of global practices. Foreign firms were not interested in India, because there was no money here. Those practicing architecture saw it as an “art form,” and we based our work in theory and within values. Today, I fear modern architecture in India has fallen hook, line and sinker for copying what the rest of the world does, good or bad. Global architecture is a formula built on very smart structural systems and mechanical equipment engagements. This is where we can learn. But the firms in the West do very little study and are mainly engaged in “façade architecture”, packaging and cladding systems that just hide a dark box within. There is no art in this. It is just decoration!

Architecture has become the art of the mundane! One needs a lot of

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theoretical words to describe and to justify what is happening, because there is no putative logic or beauty in what is happening. There are some wonderful exceptions to this in the work of Sir Norman Foster and Renzo Piano.

Looking Back

I look back at my career as a trajectory of learning and self-understanding. I see it as a long journey filled with wonderful friends, great ideas and the realisation of intriguing structures. I would like to advise upcoming designers to always search for honest “beginning points” that truly catalyse appropriate solutions, and seek the kernels of truth in those key areas of analysis. A beginning point is not a shape or a form; nor a colour or a new kind of cladding. The beginning point will find a truth between the site, the structural system, the functions and the form of the building. At some point in one’s search, these forces all become one and the artists knows he has reached a conclusion.

12 Mahindra United World College, Pune.
13 Suzlon Headquarters, Pune.