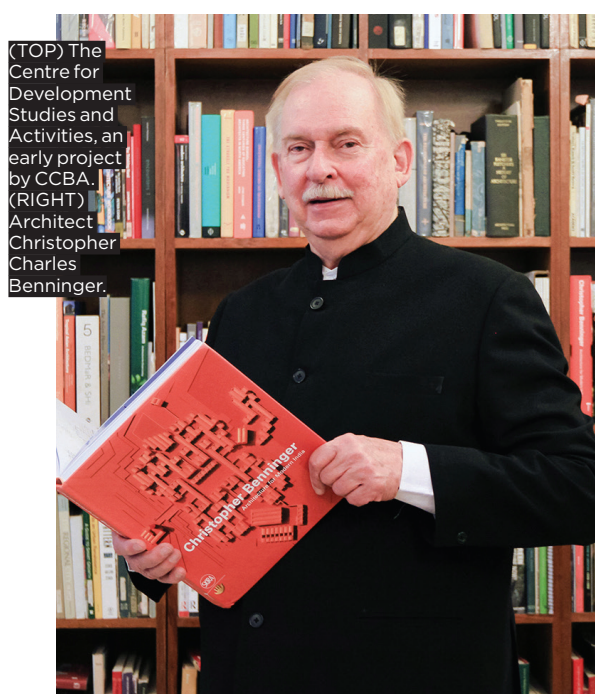


AR. CHRISTOPHER CHARLES BENNINGER

The award-winning American-born 'guru' on his indelible impression on the sands of modern Indian architecture

Words/Maria Louis

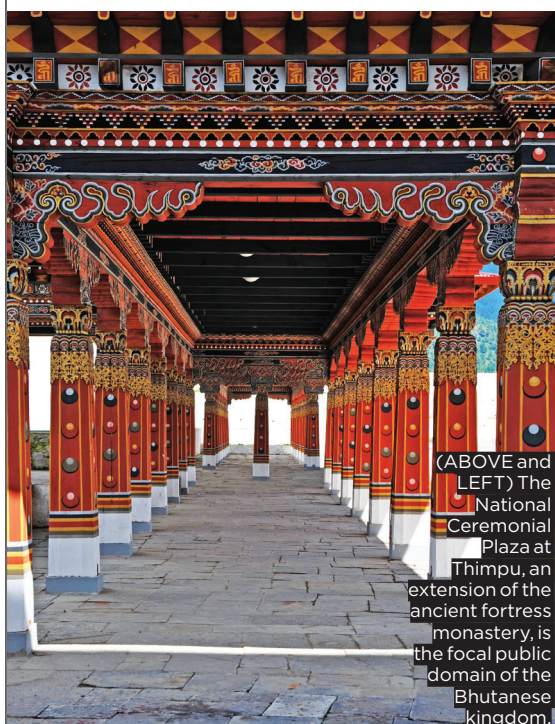


(TOP) The Centre for Development Studies and Activities, an early project by CCBA. (RIGHT) Architect Christopher Charles Benninger.

He wears multiple hats quite jauntily. The chairman of the 25-year-young Christopher Charles Benninger Architects (CCBA) is an academician, having founded two important institutions (The School of Planning in Ahmedabad (which he founded with Balkrishna Doshi in late 1971), and the Centre for Development Studies and Activities (CDSA in Pune) from where generations of planners have graduated. After studying at MIT and Harvard University in the USA, Prof. Benninger decided to make India his home, untiringly contributing to the profession of Architecture and Planning for the past five decades. He began his teaching career at The School of Architecture in Ahmedabad (1968) and Harvard's Graduate School of Design (1969-71). Prof. Benninger's early works were influenced by his association with modernist architects and the initial projects, like the CDSA in Pune, and the United World College of India, gave way to a more individualistic style. Later, through projects like the Samundra Institute of Maritime Studies, Suzlon One Earth and the Indian Institute of Management at Kolkata, he explored modern materials and sustainability as underlying themes. Residing and working from India House in Pune, his studio is supported by a team of 30 architects. Little wonder then that he was called upon to head the design jury for India's National War Memorial, at the India Gate lawns in New Delhi..

Fifty years is a long time! What brought you to India and what compelled you to make it your home?

I think my life has always been guided by what I call "the search for the



(ABOVE and LEFT) The National Ceremonial Plaza at Thimphu, an extension of the ancient fortress monastery, is the focal public domain of the Bhutanese kingdom.

unknown.” In my youth, I undertook extensive bicycle excursions over back roads from Berkeley to Los Angeles, Boston to Montreal and Paris to Athens, passing through 1,500 kms of unknown cultures, languages and political systems. I travelled alone overland from London to Mumbai, finding my own way, enjoying the great adventure of life, and learning from people I met along the way how to survive. Forty years ago, I ventured up into the high Himalayas, over a gravel road, from Phuentsholing to Thimphu, as one of the first Caucasians to enter the mountain kingdom of Bhutan overland, and being the first architect to open an office in Bhutan (1979) when there was no electricity, television or any airport. During my long stay in the Kingdom, I met people who are still my

coveted friends even now. From a search for the unknown, emerges the known!!

I first came to India out of curiosity to explore things I did not know, which intrigued me. I think I am one of the last survivors from the age of adventure. But the unknown still exists, and I love being in a place that reveals its secrets ever so slowly in refined seamless streams of inspirations.

What do you think about that decision today, and why?

What I discovered in India in the 1960s was evaporating in America. I found a kind of ideal village of friendship at the School of Architecture in Ahmedabad on my first visit in 1968, and things were much the same when I returned after teaching at Harvard to initiate the School of Planning. Yes, we have become globalised, Westernised and a consumer society, but that is really only along the main streets of big cities. Adventure still lurks down the back alleys, hides out in our villages, up in the mountains and amongst the wonderful people. India is still the place of the unknown and the adventure of discovering it!

What have been the milestones on this journey for you?

First, I have met inspiring gurus continuously. They inspired me through their storytelling, myths and as charismatic role models! But I have also had the good luck of having wonderful teachers who nourished and guided me. They inspired me to find out facts, to link them into ideas and to weave those ideas into concepts of social change and human evolution. Some are well known, but most are simple people just following their dharma and teaching me to be happy just following my own fate; others have given

me insights into the meaning of life, and an understanding of who I am, and why I exist. I want to be clear that gurus and teachers are very different from one another. Gurus demand obedience and loyalty, robbing one of individuality; teachers are givers and nourish what is unique in you. They open windows from the unknown to the known!

These strings of good luck, meeting gurus and teachers, were broken into wonderful milestones like designing the first Economically Weaker Section housing scheme for HUDCO in 1972, creating the Hyderabad Urban Development Authority's first project in 1976, a low-income township for 2,000 families; inventing the Site and Services concept in Chennai where, as a World Bank advisor, I could initiate more than 15,000 small plots where families could create their own shelters from recycled materials (1974-80).

Benchmarks followed with town plans in Sri Lanka for the UNCHS (HABITAT), work in Bhutan, first for the UNO and later for the Royal Government. My World Bank work in Indonesia, Asian Development Bank work in Malaysia and in the Philippines, UNFAO work in Nepal, initiating the Centre for Development Studies and Activities in Pune, winning the Indian Institute of Architects' annual award for excellence six times, and working in China, India, and Sri Lanka. I was invited by the UNCHS (HABITAT) to write the Theme Paper on Human Resources Development for Livable Cities delivered as a speech by the Director General at the Seventh Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements. For me, that was a watershed in life where ideas learned locally, became global concepts.

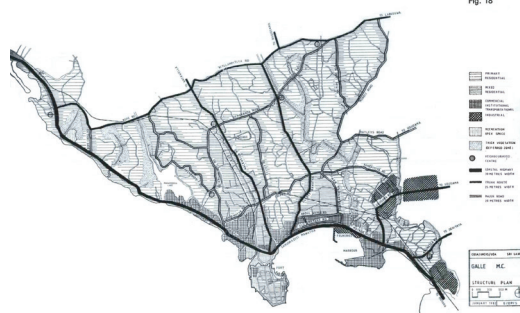
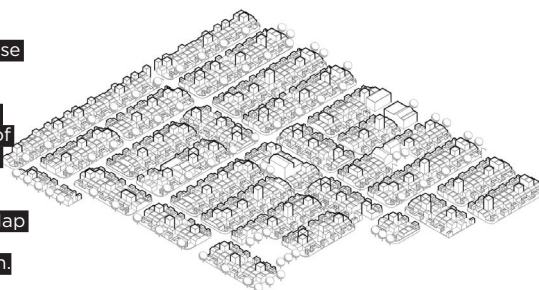
CCBA completes 25 years in 2020.

What was your vision/mission when you started the design firm? How has it evolved along the way?

Unlike as the name suggests, CCBA is really a team of creative minds. Rahul Sathe and Daraius Choksi joined Akkiseti Ramprasad and I more than two decades ago, followed by Shivaji Karekar, Bhushan Pise, Noel Jerald, Rahul Deshmukh, Gaurav Inamdar, Jasmeet Jite, Sundar Bommazee and many others. The bonding force has always been shared professional ethics and creative aspirations. We have always focused on value-based learning, research and social out-reach as milieus in which we found patrons who shared our ideals and values. With these patrons, we could think, conceive, draw and build a better world, forging a better future for coming generations. That vision has



(LEFT) India House in Pune.
(RIGHT) Isometric drawing of Low-cost Housing.
(BELOW RIGHT) Map of Galle Town Plan.



been strengthened year by year, and project after project, introducing us to great thinkers, scholars, scientific inventors and patrons of the arts. I think the over-riding theme has been to use architecture as a social tool.

What have been the challenges and fulfilments of running your practice in India?

The challenges have always been finding the right younger team members, and the right setting in which to work. These are two things that Ramprasad and I are continually striving for. Creating INDIA HOUSE gave us the setting, and year by year we have been fated to meet truly dedicated and inspiring young architects who have become nurturing contributors to our fellowship. My goal is to become irrelevant in my studio. Then I will retreat and write books.

Ramprasad has always felt we must make strong contributions to the community in which we live – and through the India House Art Gallery, he initiated the first International Architecture and Urban Planning Film Festival in India, in partnership with the

Film Archives of India. He holds 'The EarthMattersArt Competition' annually, in which about 1,800 children participate. In addition, he sponsors international art shows and hosts lectures of national importance. This gives our studio another dimension, while inspiring our fellowship to understand that being thought leaders in design and planning is not isolated in our studio, or on our construction sites.

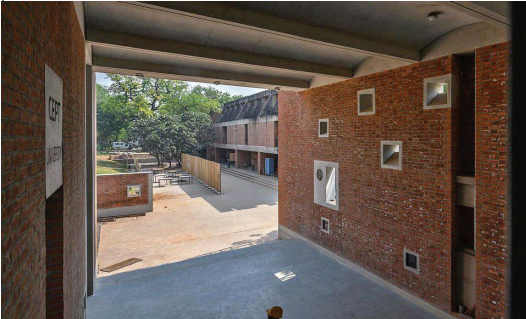
Which projects have been closest to your heart, and why?

My own Centre for Development Studies and Activities [1986-90] spoke a "language of build" that permeated through all of my later work, growing out of local materials, integrating the exterior landscape with interior spaces, speaking a vernacular language while still being original and contemporary, integrating with nature, and having human scale and ambience. The Centre has a carefully-conceived modulation and "measure," gifting it human scale and contextuality. My new studios for CEPT University echo these values, while being part of Doshi's language that gave CEPT its visual character and unique identity.

You have been on the jury for an international design competition by the Ministry of Defence – Government of India. Could you tell us about the entries that impressed you, and why WEBE Design Lab won?

Born in America, and choosing India as my home, my greatest honour here was to be made the chairperson of the committee to select the design for India's National War Memorial. It was a transcendental moment of ecstasy for me to visit the completed site in December, 2019, and to feel the strong vibrations of valour emerging from the sacred earth of this landscape of memories, remembrances and gratitude.

WEBE Design Lab was one of seven finalists who emerged out of several hundred original entries in a two-stage international competition. The design was the unanimous selection of the jury after hours of deliberation and analysis. This project won on several merits. While the design was for a large project, there is a human scale that addresses the emotions of visitors who often come on a pilgrimage to honour and commemorate a lost loved one. The project also lies low in the ground, ingeniously "giving the complex its own sense of place", in the larger Central Vista without screaming and yelling to be looked at. The designers could craft an organic and humble relationship with the ground plane, employing a materials palette sensitively linking it to the holistic historical language of the Central Vista. The manner in which the names of the martyrs are displayed is very sensitive, allowing loved ones to address the names right in front of them at "touching distance". Parents of fallen soldiers who died for their country and for our freedom have written me touching notes and letters, thanking me for honouring their sons. The designers were very sensitive to their proximity to India Gate, a British memorial to those who perished in World War One, and later dedicated to Indian heroes by the placement of an eternal flame in it. The



designers knew they were making something sacred, something for the people of India and not something for self-gratification or for personal fame. The final amazing touch was their placement of a Deep Stambh in alignment with the Central Vista axis in a manner that did not detract from the greater whole, but became a central memory point for all who visit there.

Architect, city planner, institution builder – which hat fits you best? Why?

Architecture, urban planning, writing and institution building are a part of one mission in life that while appearing different are, in fact, the same. My arrival in Ahmedabad in 1968 to study shelter systems, led to starting the School of Planning there, inspiring me to found the Centre for Development Studies and Activities, in Pune, leading me to carry out many urban plans and to design the Centre's campus, while continuing in Ahmedabad as a board member of CEPT University, and presently designing the new architectural studios there. All of the parts are of the same whole!

Who were your design gurus as you grew from a student to established architect? What do you remember and appreciate them for?

Jose Lluís Sert was a founding, yet quiet-spoken, leader of modern social thinking, which he expressed through his teaching, institution building, architecture and urban planning. I had the honour to be his student, work in his studio, to be a young friend in his inner circle, and to be a young Assistant Professor at Harvard that he had transformed, along with Walter Gropius. He founded the first ever course in Urban Design, and annually hosted the Urban Design Forum, which promoted the concept that architecture and city planning must be integrated into one holistic way of thinking in order to host the



human development and evolution needed to create more humane societies. Fumihiko Maki was a student in the first master class in urban design, worked in Sert's studio, before me, and later was my critic at Harvard. He remains both my teacher and guru today.

What is your dream for CCBA, and how close to it do you think you are?

My dream for my studio is that I become irrelevant to its growth and survival, and that it evolves internal mechanisms to sustain its goals and values, carrying on into future generations. I am happy to sense this dream coming to reality, when I see the design studies of my younger studio mates.

You are a mentor to generations of architects. Have you charted a program for interns?

Twice a year, our team invites five young architects from across India and abroad to be interns in our studio; and we have an outline of targets they fulfill in the form of reading assignments, documenting our work, and live "on the board" experiences on our projects. By sitting with them in the main studio-hall, they can observe how I work, multi-task and interact with me personally. They should notice that once I sit down at my table, I rarely get up for several hours, or the entire day. Observation and osmosis are the best forms of learning!

My disappointment is with the schools they come from who we never hear

from, either to introduce their students or to do a WebEx ascertaining their students' progress.

Do you continue to teach, follow their journey and guide them?

I have been a teacher throughout my life... and as I grew older, I realized that through writing I could reach out to many more students, over a longer period in time, and in more countries. My book 'Letters to a Young Architect', for example, has seen many reprints and has been published in the national languages of four of the world's six largest countries.

On the other hand, I give many public lectures, speaking to over 4,000 students and professionals before the lockdown across India in locations ranging from New Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Mumbai, Sangli, Mangalore, and on many occasions in Pune. In Shanghai, in January, I could address 1,000 scientists on the topic of creative work spaces, sharing the design of my new Brain Research Centre (coming up in Shanghai) with them.

What message would you give to young architects who have chosen this path?

"See your life as a continuous search for the unknown; and realize the greatest adventure is discovering yourself. Understand that architecture is merely a vehicle for self-discovery, and it is not an end in itself!"



(TOP LEFT) National War Memorial. (TOP RIGHT & LEFT) Long perspective and oculus of IIM Calcutta. (ABOVE LEFT) New CEPT building in Ahmedabad. (BELOW) His book *Letters to a Young Architect*.

