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CREATING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION LANDSCAPES

Idea Design is a consultancy firm based in Cochin, which is engaged in the practice of architecture, landscape, and urban design. Known for its ecological approach towards design, the firm—with three partners **Chitra Biley**, **Michael Little**, both landscape architects, and **Biley Menon**, an urban designer—is involved in works of different design vocabulary in institutional, hospitality, residential, and architecture conservation developments, mainly in southern India.



IDEA DESIGN TEAM | Chitra, Biley & Michael

Coming Together

BILEY

I think it was sometime in 2005-2006. We have a common client and friend, a group called Good Earth, which has offices in Cochin and Bangalore. Once we went to one of their sites in Bangalore. There, we saw a gentleman driving a JCB and expertly sculpting the terrain. That was Michael, the landscape architect. We didn't spend a lot of time together then. Later in 2006, Joss Brooks from Auroville invited us and Michael, to form a group for the Adyar Ecological Restoration Project,

Chennai, which was about to start. Our office did the base studies and research – detailed site analysis, regional studies, traffic studies, and urban design studies. Later, he worked more closely when the implementation started on the ground. In the process, we understood that each of us has a different skill set. While Chitra is strong in landscape design, engineering, drawings, and documentation, Michael is hands-on and can think of landscape design from a different perspective, more like a sculpture and its connection with the site's natural history, a quite unique approach. I could contribute to assessing the impact of ecological systems and processes, understanding land with its unseen layers like groundwater, drainage, soil, geology, and hydrology. So all these different skill sets came together in a project which actually had a lot of opportunities. We also understood the power of teamwork. Some of the projects, on which we worked together, required our combined expertise. So trying to join our strengths for positive results was the way forward for us. Later we founded a formal partnership company with the three of us.

MICHAEL

It is true that we came together to take on large-scale ecological restoration projects and biodiversity landscapes. We saw that there is a genuine opportunity to merge ecological work with inspired design. This has become our niche. Biley, Chitra, and I all have different and complementary skills. But frankly, I think the primary factor was a deep trust in each other and an abiding friendship. I think we noticed something genuine about our shared interests in this field. It was not a commercial impulse to work together, but rather an excitement that we could do work that we are passionate about. We also sensed that we might be able to do explore a new design language in this work.

Appropriating to Indian Context

MICHAEL

Each step in my career has been a surprise! After my Master's program in Landscape from the University of Massachusetts, I and a friend decided to just get our boots on, rent equipment, dig holes, level land, and make design and build projects for residential clients. We would present a plan and then build the whole design ourselves. So I learned how to do stone masonry work, building stone walls, stone paving, bricklaying, and other construction works. We used to rent a bobcat and other machinery to do all the work ourselves- site preparation, sculptural landforms, creating expressive drainage patterns, and all. We learned how things get built and we had great freedom to make adjustments on site. I got to know what a quarter-inch means in the landscape.





**ADYAR ECOLOGICAL
RESTORATION PARK,
ECOLOGICAL MASTER PLAN OF
ADYAR POONGA CREEK & ESTUARY
CHENNAI**

Adyar Wetland Reserve with the Poonga Ecopark is an environmentally-significant project in the city of Chennai. Initiated with the aim to restore the ecological balance—and raise public awareness on environmental issues in Chennai at the same time—the project subsequently included and encompassed the edge restoration of the creek and estuary. The Ecological Master Plan was envisioned at a conceptual level for the Adyar Creek and Estuary [358 acres] and detailed Ecological Restoration Plan and Design were done for the Adyar Poonga [58 acres]. Idea Design worked on the project as landscape architecture and urban design consultants with Joss Brooks, renowned ecological restoration specialist of Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants, Auroville. A combined fresh-water/ salt-water ecosystem was revived to make it an ecologically-rich and diverse system for migratory birds and estuarine ecosystems along with coastal vegetation being the significant link to tie them together.

After a decade of that experience, I moved with my family to India. Here, everything was new to me. I had to adjust to the pace and style of work in India. I was shocked to see land formation being done by twenty or thirty labourers carrying soil across the site! I realized that I would learn a lot by coming to India because the weather, soil, history, plants, people, and culture are completely different. I knew that I would keep learning and that was a great draw.

We were very fortunate to take on public ecological projects on large scales. It allows you to explore dramatic ideas, engage in larger themes, and actually create ecosystems. I have also had the great fortune to work with unique and talented people - artists, architects, educators, scientists, and NGOs. Planning restrictions are also in some cases much more flexible than in the US. Our landscape centred housing work [Good Earth] in Bangalore would be near impossible in most places in the US because of zoning restrictions, but I still don't understand India. I'm fascinated by its history. The collective notions of the landscape here are in many ways different from Europe and North America. The subcontinent with its large arable land and the intensely hot and dry season is fragile. The population pressure is age-old. The forest is therefore a special entity here. Pockets of the Indian imagination have granted forests a magical status. We resonate with this. Our designed landscapes, in general, are leaning toward becoming complex forests, meadows, and scrublands. These archetypes flow through our work.

While we are creating landscapes in India, it's also important to understand the global angle. Humans build gardens everywhere in the world from a common impulse. The world landscape history is the treasure we build from. In a subtle way, the future and the past are embedded in our work. This may be true for all designers actually. How we contemplate the past and future are important. This may bring an intangible quality. I owe a great deal to neolithic landscapes both in Europe and North America, as well as Japanese Temple gardens, Mughal Gardens, Renaissance Gardens, contemporary sculpture, and Earth Art. All of the great documented and undocumented historic landscapes throughout India are resonant including the sacred groves, and indeed the ancient stories so often set in the forests of India.

Ecological Landscapes

CHITRA

Our practice is known for designing ecological landscapes. Anything that is sensitive to the site - I would call it an ecological landscape. Landscapes should have meaning and should be useful for someone. Most of our projects also have a strong educational angle. For all these ecological projects, we have a highly technical approach that includes the study of groundwater level, spring tide level, pH of the soil among other aspects. When it comes to landscape design, each and every space is individually detailed and sculpted with respect to the natural resources of the site. We have a strong inclination towards the use of local flora and local materials, but having said that, we have consciously gone out of these limits many times. For example, in a project, while creating a butterfly garden, we planted a lot of exotic plants. The place is full of butterflies. So, one is encouraging and supporting the ecosystem and adding to its dimension by actually having many compatible species. The term 'purist' is probably something that we wouldn't associate our works with, but then we would want to do something that is logical and technically correct. We are not scientists. We are not just merely trying to create pure native habitats. In the case of projects in South India, we are not really restoring an authentic South Indian native forest. We realize that the human footprint is so much a part of this whole discussion. The place has to be functional, accessible, and safe. It should follow all the rules of a functionally designed landscape and comply with all codes. Although that doesn't sound very poetic, it probably would be better to say that our designed landscapes are ecological landscapes which function as environmental education gardens.

FACING PAGE >

GREENFIELD OFFICE EASTERN GHATS

A work space that is 100% off the grid, built with reused steel members, local silver oak wood, mountain grass thatch roof and glass windows, the environment-friendly project overlooks an enchanting valley view. The building blends inside-out with the surrounding landscape. The walls are built with local stone boulders in mud mortar. Mudflooring, bamboo furniture, granite sanitaryware, earthenware plumbing lines, solar power, wind-mill are all features of this building. The entry of the building is through stepping stones in a waterbody [in the picture] that runs inside the building and ends on a wall mural made of vertical garden.



About Clients

MICHAEL Finding good clients is the most important first step toward making a good landscape. At the beginning of a project, our clients typically have only a passing familiarity with landscape and garden design. We are fine with it as long as there is a spark, a kind of passion towards the idea of the possibility of working together, and some deeper connect to nature. They may be builders, scientists, architects, developers, or campus department heads but there has to be something “out of the box” about them. They too want something fresh. There should be a relationship, a give and take. After all, a landscape is never complete. The client and users will be forever facilitating the adjustment and evolution of the landscape. A good project is always a collaborative process. Most clients come by word of mouth.

Practice

BILEY

Kerala is a unique place where a lot of people from all over the world travel, to just immerse in its beauty. It has forty rivers, vast stretches of backwaters, two big Ramsar wetlands in Vembanad lake and Ashtamudi lake, and the Western Ghats, which is one of the rich biodiversity hotspots in India, apart from the Himalayas. With a rich history, there is a deep-rooted cultural landscape, which gives a holistic understanding of the ecosystem. Kerala is a living example of the land-water-vegetation concept that we study in the first class of landscape. A Delhite may not be able to visualize it easily, but someone from Kerala would see all the three components working together seamlessly. There is a tradition of a wet-rice culture where rice paddy is actually done in water, which directly relates the livelihood with the ecosystem. This culture traditionally connects places like Indonesia, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Japan - Oriental cultures. Kerala suddenly finds a place in that map which is quite unique. One can see that connection in the unique vernacular landscape, timber architecture, roof forms, and boat design,

So there is a lot of learning from an ecological standpoint which has helped us build our career in a different mould. You're always working with nature, so the whole concept of designing with nature is something that is embedded in our minds. Of course, it took our education at the School of Planning and Architecture at New Delhi to actually bring it out. There was a learning curve. Once you cross that barrier, then you realize that there are so many opportunities that this canvas provides. Here the market is slightly different. You have to place yourself in a certain manner to be able to do such projects. In the whole of Kerala, there are probably about a handful of practicing landscape architects. After so many years of our practice, even today, we consider ourselves at the beginning of a big journey because there is a lot to learn and it's a huge world out there.

CHITRA

When we started our practice in 2001, the profession was in the nascent stage. No one really knew much about landscape architecture. We had to educate the clients and introduce ourselves and explain what we did. Then there was a time when builders started bringing in consultants from abroad. This helped in creating the right exposure for the profession. We have always been selective in choosing our projects and clients, preferring to engage in projects of ecological or heritage value. This has helped us to develop a unique portfolio in the long run. We always had a small office with 8-10 people. A great emphasis is given to documentation, to prepare high-quality design drawings,

SELECTED LIST OF PROJECTS

Adyar Poonga Ecological Restoration Project, Chennai

Nilgiri Biosphere Conservation Park, Anaikatty

Wild Orchid Estates, Eco-community Project, Yercaud

Teakayen Ecofarms, Eco-community Project, Kodai Hills

Ecological Retrofit of Wipro Electronic City Campuses, Bangalore [EC3, EC4, EC5]

ATREE Office Campus, Bangalore

Good Earth Eco-Community projects landscape in Bangalore & Cochin

C9 Event Centre & Gardens, Kothamangalam

Mountain Shadows Resort, Wayanad

Heritage Methanam Resort, Kochi

Conservation Management Plan for Fort Cochin [with UNESCO New Delhi]

Greenfield Office & Gardens, Eastern Ghats, Tamil Nadu

Ongoing
Thrissur Zoological Park, Kerala [with Jon Coe Design, Australia]

Toyota Ecozone, Bidadi, Bangalore

Kovalam Craft Village Landscape

Ekantha Wellness Centre & Gardens, Kodai Hills

Prakriti Eco-Community Projects, Cochin



TOYOTA ECOZONE BIDADI, BANGALORE

For this 20-acre environmental education park, Toyota has developed an in-depth curriculum and hosts more than 100 schools from urban and rural Bangalore areas. The park has many unique theme gardens for learning that include an Evolution Timeline that traces the developments of life on Earth over the past 600 million years.

something that I learned, working with Prof. Shaheer early in my career. There is always a strong research component in our projects. We have associated with various ecological research institutions such as Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants, ATREE, FRLHT, and Zoo Outreach Organisation for many of the biodiversity conservation and ecological restoration projects.

Inspirations

BILEY

I had the privilege of studying under some very good teachers. K.T. Ravindran always encouraged me to carry on, even in my initial weak moments, when I thought of leaving the college. In the post-graduate program, site planning sensibilities were introduced to

me by Ravindra Bhan and Adit Pal, who were brilliant in the subject. We used to do an ecological site analysis with studies in all layers of natural processes – soil, hydrology, topography, vegetation followed by a synthesis map, and finally the master plan. While Bhan, in the site planning studio, actually handheld and taught us how to do a site analysis, Adit taught us the basics of road design, slopes, drainage, and all other technical aspects. We also had Rahul Ram, who introduced himself as the lead guitarist of Indian Ocean. He was a trained ecologist who was trained under Madhav Gadgil. That particular class influenced me a lot.

I went on to do my thesis in “Ecological Aspects of Urban Design”, a first of its kind in the department. While visiting Varanasi and Jodhpur for my case studies, I studied cultural and natural ecology and their symbiotic relationship. In practice also, in our large projects of site planning, we follow the same process and explain it to our clients.

In my initial years after post-graduation, I worked with K.T. Ravindran and Adit Pal for a year on a project in northern Kerala, which dealt with an ecologically sensitive tourism region.

Later in our practice, we got opportunities to work with many different professionals who are in the ecological landscape and restoration field. Working with Joss Brooks was very inspiring. He is a visionary and strong-willed person with an experience of more than three decades in the field of ecological restoration. Our professional engagements with Sally Walker, David Hancocks, and Jon Coe were very enriching. Working with Jon Coe was an experience that helped us to reinvent our professional skills. He was keen to impart as much of his knowledge and

expertise without holding back, and further would promote us at every opportunity when he gets inquiries and assignments for new projects. Michael has been a great source of inspiration too. We admire his talent, work, and unique understanding of ecology. So we have a lot of admiration for that, for his approach and his work.

CHITRA

Prof. Mohammad Shaheer has always remained a great source of inspiration for me in my life. My academic thesis, Cultural Landscapes of Kerala, guided by him, was perhaps the first-ever thesis on the subject at the institute. His silent and bold direction always guided me to reach greater heights. After completing post-graduation, I worked with him for a year. I was awestruck by the meticulous detailing done in the office, be it aesthetics, contexts, engineering or horticulture, and also equally important aspects like client interaction, office management, and last but not the least, inspiring colleagues and a tough boss!

Working with renowned Zoo designer, Jon Coe, landscape architect [2014-2017] on the project of Thrissur Zoological Park was like doing a second post-graduation. Jon is a loving senior professional, very generous to share his storehouse of knowledge. In fact, he is always happy to explain the nuances and reasons behind his design. I have always been wonderstruck by his deep knowledge and clarity of thought during the design process and his willingness to incorporate suggestions of his colleagues and juniors. He is never reluctant to revise design if he notes a flaw or finds a better solution. The process of working with him added a whole new direction to my professional life.



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