For Jabeen, who belongs to Kottayam, a small town in Kerala, the exposure to ‘Great Architecture’ at that time was luckily nil. The canvas was blank but the palette rich with fresh and charming hues of small-time life with big-time values! The coming years of professional training in India and the United States would see her carefully adding new tints and bolder shades to enhance the basics.

The itinerary of her professional journey into architecture was carefully planned. She started out by working with Ms/ Cyriac Vellappally, one of Kerala’s oldest and best known practices, handling large-scale dream projects. Later, she was Assistant Architect at the Greater Cochin Development Authority, exploring and understanding architecture for the masses. The next three years saw her teaching at her parent college. Teaching inspired her to start her own schools of Interior Design at various places in India and in Dubai. In 1992, she was finally ready to start her own practice in Cochin.

Today, after 26 years of exposure and 20 years of practice, Jabeen Zacharias Architects is a name of national and international repute. The firm with offices in Cochin, Bangalore, US and Dubai has two separate wings. The Inside handles interior projects while Studio J looks after architectural projects. The firm has dabbled in projects ranging from hotels and resorts, museums and showrooms, banks and offices, and exclusive residences. The clientele includes World Bank, Le Meridien, Taj, KTDC, Samsung, HDFC and ICICI among others.

When asked about her philosophy, Jabeen put forth her main design dictum as “Buildings that belong”. “Unfortunately what we witness most of the time today is superfluous cloning of ‘modern architecture’ with neither any understanding of dynamic logistics nor the intricate genetics of the region to which it gets transplanted,” she says.

“I plan for people, their needs and moods. I accommodate them and the time corridors they travel through,” she says. The sensitive blending of time and space is a difficult task. But her training as a multi-faceted artist (theatre, music, dance and drama) adds to the versatile vocabulary of this designer and helps her translate and transcend the intangibles as tangents of her designs.

Insite takes a close look at four of Jabeen’s projects:

For Ar. Jabeen L. Zacharias, architecture was an accident. After missing that dream seat in electronics engineering by a mere mark, she simply didn’t care and opted for the first course on the list - A for architecture! If this was an accident, it was one waiting to happen!

Today, when Jabeen Zacharias Architects is a name to reckon with in the design fraternity, Jabeen sees her ‘accident’ as a divine intervention and says it was the most beautiful turning point of her life.
Le Meridien, Kovalam

Almost 66 acres — two-thirds of exotic Kovalam — came into the hands of Kovalam Hotels Limited in 2002. They soon had a tie-up with Le Meridien, a name to be reckoned with in the hospitality sector. For Jabeen, it was a prestigious assignment to be the main consultant and interior architect on a project of such scale and stature. The brief was simple: To make the Le Meridien Beach Resort a destination in itself.

The renovation saw public spaces and the main entrance plazas placed on the top most level. The approach to the rooms was through sprawling lobbies and winding corridors dotted at regular intervals with interestingly framed openings letting in views of swaying palms and the rolling sea, leaving one in a daze on “exterior-interior” definitions! Light filters through the ceiling, which is done selectively with crude planks matted loosely in lighted grids. Stone-paved winding paths lined with wayside pools, lotus flowers, wooden bridges and glimpses of bright tropical colors — one may easily take it as a walk to the village temple or a gram panchayat.

Inside the rooms, the entrance vestibule, toilet and wash areas are clubbed into a rustic zone for a smooth transition from the landscaped ambience of the corridors. The core space takes simpler lines with plain whites before it flows out to the balcony and outwards to meet the panoramic view of the cove. Material choices range from simple terracotta tiles to mud-washed and white-washed walls and the richness of old teak. The furniture and furnishings mix an innovative blend of vernacular and colonial styles while the colour (on the paintings at the head board) comes from traditional vegetable dyes.

The renovation was phased over four years, taking turns with the sprawling blocks along five levels on a steeply contoured cliff catering to around 180 rooms and 50 chalets. Today, the property has changed hands and is with the Leela Group. The design, fresh with a vernacular vocabulary typical of Kerala’s untainted rural settings, has won much acclaim and many awards.

Collectorate, Ernakulam

The District Administrative Headquarters of Cochin with its corridors, cabins, cubicles and furniture strewn all over the place told a story of 35 years of PWD constructions and expansions without much logic. To reorganise it to symbolise vibrant Cochin, the commercial capital of “God’s own country”, was a tall order!

As much as 650 cu. m. of 35-year-old brick masonry and RCC lintels were removed to open out 40,000 sq. ft. of well-ventilated and naturally lit spaces. Departments, sub-departments, smaller cells and their links were analysed, studied and zoned for an organic, codified and unified concept.

The east wing thus became the “head”, with the collector, executive authorities, together with the “brain” — NIC’s (National Informatics Centre) huge computer installations in place. The central wing is the “heart”, housing the entire workforce while the west wing is the “soul”, with interactive spaces such as the auditorium, seminar halls, recreational facilities, media rooms etc. Into this, “life” is infused through the clean and clear arterial networks of circulation cores and corridors.

The logic and reason to identify and define every single person and his space in the context of the parental department and the best interface options with respect to other departments was achieved through intelligent colour coding, which labelled spaces with clarity. This is what makes the Collectorate what it is today — a picture of dignity and vibrancy.
Kadavu

In the cultural and traditional context of ancient Kerala, Kadavu means “a small make-shift clearing for boats to land by the water”. Urbanisation today has left behind a trail of “deserted Kadavus” along the banks of many a backwaters and rivers of rural Kerala. For her own hideout amid the coconut groves by a small cove ashore the mighty Vembanad Lake, Jabeen couldn’t think of another name.

Designing for oneself is the toughest test for an architect. “It is as if you are supposed to prove something to all those anxious onlookers. I wanted it to be very simple and basic” Jabeen says.

The site came readily “set out” with pegs in the form of coconut trees at 10m x 10m grids. Not wanting to break the pattern, the house snuggled in between two rows of coconut trees with an east-west orientation with major living areas facing the shady north. The main entrance was east-facing, suggesting an auspicious entry. The western side, with a wide verandah, keeps the bedrooms cool. The three bedrooms have excellent and different views of the backwaters. Even the toilets, with adjustable louvered window shutters, provide a view.

The design explores two very deep and simultaneous relationships. One is with nature itself; romanced with its wide windows with not even grills and sensuous simplicity. The other is along its spatial axis. The entire space within the perimeter opens into each other through a series of cutouts, openings and common “sky” below the unobstructed hipped roof.

Theera, Bangalore

Theera by the Hebbal Lake in Bangalore is an apartment project on the anvil comprising 26 floors of high-end luxury apartments in various permutations and combinations. With a 1:3 carpark ratio in three basements, Theera is launched from a 1.5m-high podium via well-appointed porches, plazas and lounges. The building then rises through a plush double height-atrium studded with an array of recreational facilities such as the gym, spa and yoga room before finally flowing out into the cool climax of the spectacular infinity pool on the first floor. The apartments then rise upwards through 26 floors with incredible views of Hebbal Lake to surface at the Skyclub floor, followed by spectacular penthouses and a helipad on top!

In spite of its sheer scale and size, Theera is a picture of lucid poetry. The simple sweep of its masses, decked with the precise lines of liberating sky balconies; the neat configuration of its axes tantalisingly tied with the string of its split-level terraces; and the contemporary vocabulary of modern materials juxtaposed with the rusticity of its pylons and sensuous Indian art panels — they all ensure a certain elegance. The layout advocates “one’s own villa in the sky” since the design with terraces and pools allow each family to shape their respective space to suit their very own lifestyle.