

Site Visit: Thulir, Sittlingi District, TN
By: Anjana Mohan On: Wed, 4th Feb 2021

Only a 4 hour drive from Bangalore, Thulir is situated in the beautiful valley of the Kalrayan Hills, just East of the Servarayan Hills, where Yercaud is located.



We started our tour at the old campus, which was on the personal land of Anu & Krishna, two idealistic architects who started this work in 2005. In 2019, the school has moved to the new campus on land that is owned by Thulir Trust..

A nurse from Tribal Health Initiative (THI) visited for the parent teacher meeting. Anu's interaction with her gave me the sense of a closely knit community of people with varying levels of investment in the school and the community. She is part of

“family”. Other school children visited with their family and it was clear that students were treated as humans with curiosity and potential, and that there was no hierarchical power structure between teachers and students.

The architecture immediately struck me as local. The grass roof thatching was striking (longevity of ~25 years) and different from the more common palm frond (2-3 years max). It was unfortunate that concrete construction has become aspirational and some of the best of the sustainable vernacular



traditions were being lost. Inevitably the students pick up on and learn from the careful architectural choices made on campus.



Anu told me about how the composting toilets work. Children, parents and the community were taught to mix turmeric root / sand / coconut husk in with their solid waste and to separate their urea laden (and therefore smelly) liquid waste. In each of the toilets, there was a visually obvious way to do this. Composting toilets and their use had become second nature to the community. For those children who wonder how toilets work, the local nature of the compost pit yielding fertilizer, and the soak pit for the evaporation of the liquid, would be the norm, rather than the invisible magic of piping and a far away sewage treatment plant.

Lunch at the kitchen included locally grown millets and vegetables, another way in which Thulir was making conscious and sustainable choices.

At the new campus, a few km away, the buildings were all newer and also built with locally available materials and skills, thoughtfully constructed to be naturally ventilated and very open in feeling. Each “space” was designed to offer lessons to all visitors by simply existing as it did. Door / Gates and window grills were playfully crafted to offer passive lessons.



- The thin railings of one gate had washers and nuts like an abacus.
- Another door had shapes that could be seen as a lion or an animal.
- The slender window brackets were shaped like birds.
- The grills in divided rectangles that could make fractions visibly accessible to learners, or triangles nested in other triangles.
- Another round window had “spokes” that could be effective to teach time, radians, pie charts or proportions
- One window grill consisted of a series of squares tilted to touch at $\frac{1}{3}$ the distance from the corner of the nesting square, making a spiral pattern of squares.



Floors were inlaid with tangram pieces that could fit together in various ways. Gable lights were made of a pattern of recycled glass bottled. Fluted roof panels created a visual rhythm above the assembly space. Window shutters were constructed from recycled crating wood in which materials were delivered. A “tower” with solar panels still provides power to both the old campus (now used primarily as a residential facility) and new campus. All this was evidence that the children and campus visitors learned how to sustain themselves with resources on-site and received an automatic “placed-based education” that normalized local strategies.

The Architectural / Construction features and the way Ram (whose wife also volunteers at the school and children are students there) spoke about the books that children were reading made it evident that Thulir understood the “constructivist concept” of education. Children could constantly construct their reality and learn things through their interpretations. The physical environment of Thulir was created to facilitate such learning and expose them to a variety of concepts that would become part of their lived experience. I suggested that students be given a chance to interact with the diesel motor they had for their well to pump water around the school and Ram liked the idea. Children had already been exposed to the solar panels above their solar tower and battery storage room.



A small team of recent graduates showed up to continue work on a construction project. They were technically trained in rammed earth construction and were



completing work on a foundation for a building, using minimal cement. They were being paid for this work and confident about their skills and the non-traditional construction technique being utilized. These youth worked with the dignity and self respect that is not apparently visible on traditional rural or periphery-urban construction projects. They worked without supervision, apparently motivated internally to progress the project.

Conversation with Anu revealed that local Govt schools are dysfunctional. Local teachers had, in the past, “hired” local girls to “run the classroom” with lessons being read in the traditional model of hierarchical disbursement of information. These were not effective learning spaces and both parents and students wanted more. Some of these local girls who have taken on the role of teacher have attended Thulir.

Despite not being able to observe the school on a normal work day I had the strong sense that this was a deeply rooted community learning environment. Thulir is educating children to live more successful lives in such a way to be able to give back to the local community, understand and value their own places in the world.