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Laurie Baker: Poetry In Mud

With the passing away of **Laurie Baker** in 2007, Indian architecture has lost its breath of fresh air in a man who single-handedly gave Indian architecture and low-cost construction a new approach, a new meaning, a new dimension. Suku Dass of Design & People caught up with Laurie Baker in June 2006. Excerpts from the interview:



Suku Dass (Right) with Laurie Baker and his wife Elizabeth at their 'Baker Style' house at Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. (Photo: Vinod T)

ARCHITECT Laurie Baker certainly knew his mud. In the 1980s his ideas caught the imagination of a younger, environmentally-aware generation of Indian architects, nearly 100 of whom now work for Costford (the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development), a non-profit organisation that practices Baker's approach. The Centre has built homes for 10,000 poor families, for which it charged no design fee.

"You are bringing knowledge and qualifications from the west, but they will be useless unless you try to

understand our needs here. The greatest needs are in the villages and for the ordinary people, not in places like Bombay". Transformed by this meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in the 1940s, British architect Laurence Wilfred Baker (Laurie) settled down in rural India to design buildings for the leprosy mission. He spent the rest of his life designing visionary and durable buildings at low cost that were beautifully responsive to India's climate and country, to the needs of the masses, and to the tradition of Indian craftsmanship.

His coup d'etat was the Centre for Development Studies, a 10-acre postgraduate campus built in the early 1970s on a hill above Thiruvananthapuram, and which gave full rein to his ingenuity and imagination. Rippling brick walls coil around trees enclosing shady, circular courtyards, a network of raised walkways, roof terraces and an eight-storey library tower.

Suku Dass: As a child what was your dream? You wanted to be an architect or you had some other profession in your mind?

Laurie Baker: No... depends on what do you mean by a child. Two-years-old? No... A five-year-old? No... (laughs...) by 10, I was beginning to get particularly interested. I mean, at that time I never thought of what I would do. I didn't have a list - whether architecture, doctoring, engineering... but somehow my inclination even then automatically fell into the architectural wing.

SD: You had some interest in art?

LB: Yes, I was usually at the top of the class for drawing, freehand and painting. The school I went to had a very good art man in charge of the drawing and painting. He was a well-known painter, forgot his name (laughs...) but he was well-known at that time. I was really interested in him and he became interested in me - I mean I presume I showed a bit more interest in his class than the average school boy.

SD: What age did you come to India?

LB: I don't know, don't remember - I think when I was around 20. It was in 1937 - just before the war - don't ask me which war. (laughs...)

SD: Later was there a moment when you felt that you wanted to go back to England?

LB: No... only just to visit briefly. My parents were there and they came to see me here from time to time. But I wanted to show Ponnamma (my wife) my background.

SD: What would you like to call your style of buildings? Some call it 'the Baker Style'.

LB: Oh no... It's entirely incorrect because I came to India on an architectural mission, a mission for lepers. There are leprosy homes all over India in the south, everywhere... 80 homes or something like that. So I very quickly noticed through an architect's eye that the local architecture in one area was not repeated in the next area and I eventually discovered that it was connected to the available building material. There were not many places where you can make brick - it is expensive because you have to burn it. So it was sometimes stone work, mud work and wood work etc. So I wasn't trying to evolve a Laurie Baker style. I wanted to fit in my work the local building materials. Some areas used brick, other areas used no brick at all and stone in other places and only mud in other places... so the architecture depends on the material availability - mud, stone, brick, wood etc. You see, when I came to India in... never mind, way back (laughs...) cement was hardly known in India. This (pointing to the wall behind) is not cement, this is lime... Kummayam - the building material, I mean the binding material like the mortar depended entirely on the area. It was only considerably later that cement was beginning to be used but it was all coming from China, Korea and Japan and not produced in India.

SD: Even Korea?

LB: Yes, Korea. So I used it when it was available, where it was available or if the local material was not satisfactory. But there was hardly any or very little cement work to be found anywhere in India... my work was all over the place. So I used whatever the local way of building material was used... I did the same thing, the locals did.

SD: Any of your projects you like the best?

LB: (laughs...) Hmm... I enjoyed everyone of them.

SD: You have built institutions, residences, restaurants... Is there anything in particular that you wished to build but never got a chance?

LB: I was always fully occupied... but, no, nothing in particular.

SD: Recently an architect commented on your Thiruvalla Church Project, that you have not considered the life of the building. He says the building will stand only for 25 years.

LB: You would work on any material all over India, in some places stone, in others brick, and also cement, whichever is available, and there are many places all over India where it's nothing but mud and these structures

have been up hundreds of years. So...

SD: There are lots of people who follow the Baker Style... Are they living up to your expectations?

LB: If they have understood what I was doing... wherever, whichever part of India, I used whatever the local building material was available there. If they do the same, then I am very pleased. Well, it's silly to use the material that you bring from China, Europe, Africa or any other country. Use local material... and what you find in one part of India is very different from what you find in Tamil Nadu and anywhere else. So the different styles of architecture results from using the local material available for building. Brick is a comparatively... the modern burnt brick... is comparatively recent, just 200-300 years old, whereas stone has been in use for much longer and has not changed at all. But the one thing which stopped all this is the introduction of cement. Cement of course is a manufactured material; you don't dig out cement from the earth. It has only been used in building technology in the last fifty years. Before that here in Kerela, the main mortar was lime, kummayam, instead of cement. Now it is not even readily available. But I hope that wherever it is available, it is being used.

SD: Nowadays you see a lot of transplanting of old buildings. What is your opinion on this?

LB: I don't know... well, in many cases of transplanting as you call it, it is that they were good buildings, comfortable to live in and all made locally and used in a particular area probably in some sort of farming or may be producing some sort of particular material. When it comes to a bigger town in a place like Trivandrum then there are many areas in which... I mean it's no longer the same thing. (Laughs...) It is not the cheapest but the cheapest, strongest and most permanent structure that matters.

SD: A comment on modern buildings.

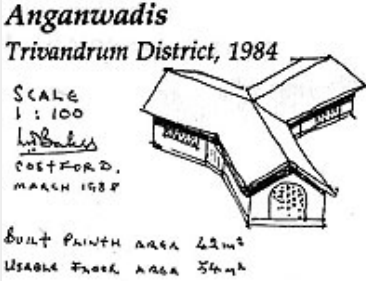
LB: (Laughs...) As long as I don't have to live in them. (Laughs...) But if that's what people want, then they should have it...

SD: Any message to young architects?

LB: Not really. If they are following the so-called modern styles they must ask themselves if this is the ideal way of building using the local material vis-à-vis the climate and the way people live, what their occupations are and if all of this is suitable, then take in the cost factor... (points to the wall behind) This is little cement... (points to another wall), this is all lime. One or two disadvantages of both these materials are... lime is very slow in setting. So if I am building this wall today I can build up to this height and I cannot go on with it for another two or three days whereas with cement what I have done today is strong and set in a matter of hours and I'm ready to build on it further tomorrow. So cement has its uses but of course it is much more costly.

SD: Is there a particular style of architecture or an architect who has influenced you?

LB: No. I have been interested in all of them. While you are in a particular area linked with the locally available material, that for me is most important...



Baker on 'Laurie Baker Architecture'

"Columbus is reputed to have discovered America, but a large number of people had been already living there without the publicity of his discovery for a very long time. Similarly, when I made my own little personal discoveries, I realised that I had merely chanced to find an extensive set of building systems which were in no way 'discoveries' to more than five hundred million people! I wanted to make use of this new knowledge in my own work. Perhaps it was as well that my employers brushed it all aside as a romantic notion for I realised I was merely a witness these apparently endless indogenous skills and was in no way capable of implementing them so early after my 'discoveries'. Rather reluctantly I had to return to my drawing board and design 'proper' buildings. I can't say that the result of my latest education was wasted. I learnt more about the more acceptable local materials, with new (to me) ways of using burnt brick, stone, tiles and timber. I also used new kinds of mortar and plaster and, as much as possible, tried to design my buildings in such a way that they would not be offensive or unacceptable to my real clients, users of the buildings and so that they would fit it with local tiles and not be an offense to the eyes of the people with whom I had chosen to live with. I think this was probably the second biggest step towards what (if there really such a thing) is described as a Laurie Baker architecture." **(Unpublished)**

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