
Frontline

Volume 20 - Issue 05,
March 01 - 14, 2003
India's National Magazine
from the publishers of THE
HINDU



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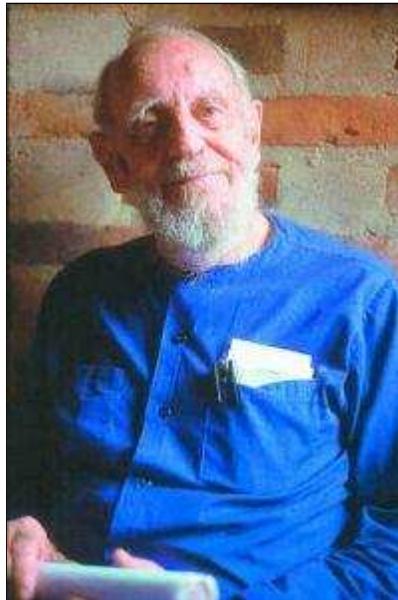


ARCHITECTURE

Laurie Baker's creative journey

JOGINDER SINGH
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Photographs: Joginder Singh

Adapted from *Laurie Baker* by Atul Deulgaonkar (Akshar Prakashan, Mumbai) as translated from the Marathi by Joginder Singh and Shrinivas Warkhandkar. The books was first published in 1994 with two successive editions - last print 1999. Price Rs.150.



IT was the year 1932. At the Edward Grammar School in Aston, England, the annual results were out, and there was anxiety in the air. The teachers and parents alike were in the process of deciding their wards' future careers, based on the results.

The Birmingham Gas Distribution Authority's chief accountant, Wilfred Baker, and his younger son Laurence, were waiting in a sombre mood. Studying Laurence's marks sheet, the Headmaster declared: "Latin-40,

Science-42, Maths-43, History-Geography-50, English-51!" The Headmaster turned and looked at Laurence a.k.a. Laurie. The boy did not seem to have a care in the world. The Headmaster said: "Science and Commerce can be ruled out. Maths you'll not be able to manage. Don't even hope that with profit and loss calculations he'll inherit your seat. The Arts seem to be the most appropriate for him."

"Language he'll progress in. So what are your other interests, Laurie?"



'The Hamlet', Laurie Baker's home in Thiruvananthapuram, built on a steeply sloping and rocky hillside that hardly had any vegetation when Baker started constructing it, is now a visual delight.

Laurie immediately started reeling off his interests: "Sketching, swimming, wandering in the jungle, cycling..."

"All right, all right, would you prefer to be an artist, then?" the Headmaster asked.

On this Wilfred Baker said: "No, No! I don't want an artist in my house, anything else will do." His stout declaration slightly startled the Headmaster... Quiet reigned for some time. Suddenly the Headmaster got an idea.

"Do you know how to sketch houses?" he asked.

"Yes, I've sketched quite a few," Laurie said.

"Have you played the game of making houses out of cardboard?" the Headmaster asked.

"I have with me lots of colourful houses," the boy replied.



The living room at 'The Hamlet'. An integration of new building and salvaged timber from traditional buildings that were being demolished.

Wilfred Baker said: "He's always on to something with paper and scissors."

"So tomorrow bring along some of your cardboard houses and show them to me," the Headmaster told Laurie. And to the father he said: "Don't worry Mr. Wilfred, send Laurie tomorrow and we'll get him an admission for Architecture."

"Architecture?" asked Wilfred.

"To make houses one can do with engineers, but to decide how to go about the construction, how to use the land properly, how to choose the shapes, consultation with an architect is required. Not just in England, all over Europe architects are in demand. So we'll send Laurie to the University's Principal and let's see what happens." The Principal of the Birmingham School of Architecture interviewed Laurie and gave him an admission to a course in Architecture.

The youngest member of the Baker family thus drifted towards what was in its context a totally new branch of knowledge. Laurie's elder brothers, Leonard and Norman, were both studying law. His married sister, Edna, was a housewife.

His mother Emily used to feel that like his father, Laurie too should become an accountant. That Laurie, after becoming an architect, would go to India and carve a niche for himself was a thought that would never have entered anybody's mind!

BY the time Laurie was studying architecture, his birthplace, Birmingham, had already become an industrial city. Industrialisation was then at its peak. The "Stockton and Darlington Railway" system that had been set up in 1825 to bring ore from the mines was no longer a novelty. A network of railway tracks was already in place all over the country.

Metalled roads on land and ships at sea had hastened the progress of England. Coal had replaced wood in the process of melting iron ore. Mass production of iron brought down its cost. All this led to Birmingham becoming the centre for factories manufacturing equipment.

Even these factors had become history. The Industrial Revolution (a term that was popularised by Arnold Toynbee) was now 125 years old. The First World War had led to the upsetting of Britain's standing in the world. Britain's monopoly in all fields had waned.

From the point of view of architecture, the post-concrete era was in. The revolution that had followed the invention of cement by Joseph Aspidin of Yorkshire in 1824 was now 108 years old. Construction took on a new pace in France, Germany and America. New research had started on ways to increase the strength of concrete.

In the year 1879, Francis Hannebeck of France succeeded in making pillars and beams out of concrete reinforced with steel rods, thereby laying the foundations of modern architecture.

In these times of modern materials and changing designs, Baker was trying to understand architecture. He was also simultaneously engrossed in his hobbies. On holidays he would get on his cycle and wander about. The ocean, the jungle and its fauna would captivate him. He would invariably sketch what he saw.



**The living room of Dr. Dolas' residence in Thiruvananthapuram.
Baker playfully uses curved forms.**

After the second year's examinations, Baker went on a cycling expedition to Europe with his friends. The impact this expedition would have on him was something Laurie could not assess then. He had seen changing house types and different kinds of occupations. The painful period that followed Hitler's occupation of Germany had unleashed a certain terror. Even listening to the experiences was agonising. Innumerable beautiful as well as painful memories of the tour enriched

Laurie Baker. Inspired by the symphonies of Beethoven and Bach, he would play the organ in the church. The listeners would just lose themselves in the melodious notes. Laurie himself would get so engrossed in the music that he would forget everything else. He made it a point to see all of Shakespeare's plays being enacted. Trying to read and understand the poetic dialogues, rather than indulge in oratory, had become a habit with him. All these pursuits had a positive influence on him.

While still a student, Laurie Baker had decided that earning money would not be the motto of his life. In the year 1937, when he graduated as an architect, in Europe the leaders of the modern movement had laid its foundations with a set of amazing architectural creations.

Europe was going through a period of unrest. Spain was already at war. The dark clouds of the Second World War were looming, and Germany's supreme leader Hitler was the cause. France and England too had to get involved in the War. Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Most European countries forced their youth to enlist in the army.

The religious group of the Quakers formed various groups to take care of the wounded from the War. The Cadburys family (the chocolate-makers) gave their home near Birmingham to the Quakers to set up a hospital. Baker started going there.

At that time the Japan-China war was in its final stages. In 1931 Japan occupied Manchuria. The Chinese Emperor Fu-Yi was allowed to reign for the sake of appearances, while in actuality the Japanese Army wielded power. In spite of the United Nations asking Japan to withdraw its forces, Japan was not ready to do so. Instead, Japan quit the U.N. In 1939, with the start of the Second World War, Japan teamed up with Italy and Germany. The Japanese occupied quite a few provinces of China. In the war between Japan and China thousands of soldiers were wounded. But under international convention, the Red Cross could not go there. So the Quakers decided to send a group there.

There was a shortage of volunteers. Baker enlisted in the Friends Ambulance Unit. To be able to help out during the operations, Baker had to undergo training in areas ranging from first aid to anaesthesia.

Resigning from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA, the professional association of architects in the United Kingdom along with international members), Baker left for China. He stayed in China for approximately three years, during which period he got introduced to the lifestyle, craftsmanship and philosophy of the Chinese people.

Baker would have his meals at irregular hours, and go on working without giving it a thought. This had an effect on his body and he fell ill. The group with which he was working decided to send him to England to recuperate.

Baker came to India to catch the steamer to London from Bombay. The steamer would not leave for another three months so he had to wait. Here too he met Quaker friends.



Baker's innovative use of discarded bottles, inset in the wall at Col. Jacob's residence in Thiruvananthapuram, creates a stained glass effect.

It was during a chance encounter with Mahatma Gandhi later that Baker decided to get back to India. He did so in 1945 and for three years travelled all over the country helping the leprosy mission repair its leprosy homes and build new ones. He got exposed to indigenous architecture and was amazed at the way in which simple materials could be exploited to produce buildings with refined aesthetics and lasting qualities. These formative years laid the foundation of Baker's approach to architecture.

Having lived for a few years at Pithoragarh (now in Uttarakhand) and then at Vagamon, a hill area of Kerala, Baker finally moved to Trivandrum (now called Thiruvananthapuram) in 1970. Over the years, as needs increased and the required finances became available, his present home - The Hamlet - evolved. Baker started taking up architectural projects actively. The author goes on to describe Baker's life and architecture.

Baker's house in a quiet niche in Kerala's capital city represents a captivating fusion of nature and home. The feeling of being away from nature always brings a certain melancholy to the city-dweller. The fact that nature and home have become two separate entities brings so much pain that one can barely think of anything else. In Baker's creations one can always see a great respect for nature. A peaceful co-existence

involving nature, man and home comes across in his work. Moving around within Baker's architecture one feels that one has been transcended to a novel and poetic world. The extreme simplicity in his architecture infuses tranquillity and leaves one at a loss for words. He has preserved the simplicity of the Quakers and Gandhian thought in his architecture. He had the realisation that he was to build houses for the common man. Simplicity has its own inherent beauty. One does not need to do anything special to bring it out. Bahina Bai (a great Marathi poetess) and Tukaram too used examples from everyday life, which is why they did not have to struggle to create the kind of effect they did. Their poetry was so simple, which is the reason it has become immortal.

Baker did not want to leave his imprint on his architecture. Had that been the case he would have created monumental complexes. Farmers and fishermen make houses that blend with the surroundings. Their designs are absolutely need-based. Houses in different States such as Rajasthan, Kerala and Maharashtra vary in character: architects do not need to interfere.

Baker followed the principle that a house should seem to be owned by its owner and not be merely a statement made by the architect. He is not the kind of person who would sit cooped up in a room with a drafter. For Baker, the blueprint has no finality about it and he does not get work done by giving orders. He never entrusts work to contractors. Baker builds houses by making sketches on paper that a mason can comprehend. Baker is in effect like a head mason himself who is actively involved in every stage of construction. Possessing a combination of Pandit Kumar Gandharva's genius and Satyajit Ray's ability to identify beauty even in the simplest of situations, Baker brings about a creative invention of beauty through simplicity, all the time taking care of the various elements from the foundation to the roof.

The sculptor brings out beauty by chiselling away the unnecessary parts of the stone. Using words effectively, the poet brings out emotions. The artist brings out the various qualities of nature through the medium of his canvas.

To express their ideas and thoughts, architects have with them formless space. The skilled architect merely shapes the brick and stone that occupy the space. One can witness the architect's creativity through the shapes and textures he uses. A genuine architect has the ability to give meaning to the space that connects two rooms or even walls. Stone and brick seem to pulsate with life whenever such inventions occur in architecture. One can experience peaceful space, fascinating light, and inexpressible peace from meaningful, calm architecture. Just by being within a historical work of architecture one feels grand. Baker's architecture creates a transcendental feeling.

When Laurie Baker talks, he does not theorise. His way of talking is simple and straight. He does not use complicated words or technical lingo while describing his architecture. But the observer is able to

witness the unconventional nature of his architecture. According to him all issues are simple and easy. They do not need to be wrapped in a layer of ideology or philosophy.

Baker artfully provides spaces to maintain privacy as well as interaction. He does not use shapes purely because they are fashionable or trendy. At times the shape he uses evolves out of the land and at other times it evolves out of the intended function of a structure. It never appears that things have been done in a certain manner just for the sake of doing so.

Baker's concept does not entirely take shape on the drawing board. Working with a schematic drawing, he makes spontaneous changes while construction is under way. In singing and in theatre, improvisation is important. Artists who desire variety do not like doing the same thing over and over again. Baker, talking about architecture, says: "Can one call the person who makes 500 similar houses an architect? It is not difficult to make 10 to 12 different houses using the same materials. That is why such established practices have to be stopped. One can come up with different options even without cutting trees or levelling the ground. Monotonous houses can be avoided."

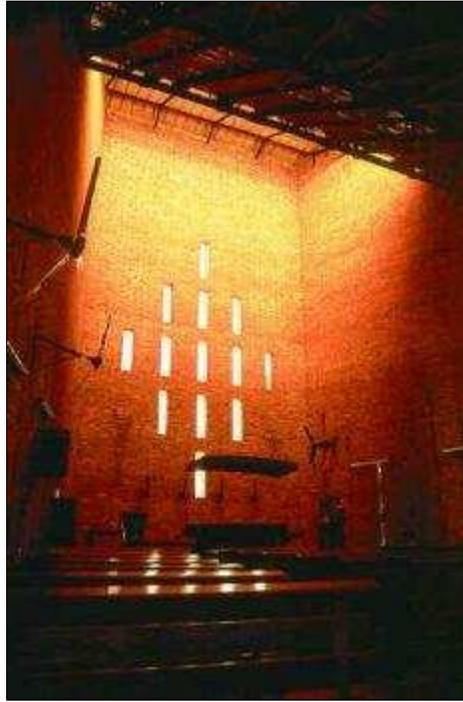
The author of the book goes on to question the relevance of cost-effective housing in the current context.

For who exactly is the cost-effective house meant? This question has been asked often. Those from the economically weaker sections find such houses to be backward. The economically weaker sections consider the upper class and middle class urban houses to be ideal and they, therefore, aspire for such houses.

Says Laurie Baker: "Cost-effective houses are not just for the poor, they are for everyone. The equation that a cost-effective house is a house for the poor, implying a bad looking house, can definitely be proved wrong. Isn't it the responsibility of the upper and middle classes to stop indulging in extravagance and make better looking houses instead? This entire classification is wrong."

This belief gets reflected in Baker's work. Baker builds for a person without considering his caste, class and stature and without giving a thought to what the house would be labelled as. This establishes a personal relationship.

It is impossible to stop the wave of unimaginative, inartistic, modular and mechanical concepts in architecture. Nowadays modern architecture is invariably equated with cubical blocks, glazed windows and reinforced concrete roofs. The disparity that was thus created between architecture and nature has been accepted worldwide. Baker has brought about a conscious relationship involving nature, building materials and the overall form.



The Loyola Chapel, reflecting Baker's mastery over light.

After the Medieval Age the Indian style of architecture that was geographically relevant and that made use of locally available materials started to wane. There was paucity of work for the skilled architects and craftsmen who used to thrive under the patronage of kings and landlords, building their palaces and bungalows.

Unskilled workmen took up the work in the villages. The carpenters and blacksmiths too started taking up masonry work when necessity demanded. The art and technique of construction faded away. But still in some States and regions, traditions of good and meaningful architecture are alive.

Baker gave a new dimension to local architecture. He says: "No innovative artist can hope to proceed in work without having gained an understanding of the local wisdom of a place." Kumar Gandharva performed the folk songs of Malwa. Folk songs were always there. Everyone accepts the fact that folk songs came out of folk music. Kumar Gandharva showed us their beauty and simplicity.

Building arches, *jaalis*, frameless doors and windows does not constitute a new discovery... Baker has merely compiled the techniques. He had one singular purpose - to create a beautiful building using the minimum possible quantity of materials. In fact, creating a beautiful building by overlooking nature proves even costlier. Natural rhythm is intrinsically beautiful. A merger with nature occurs when Baker's forms start resonating with this natural rhythm.

Even though Baker has completed 50 years of practising architecture in

India, he has stayed away from mainstream commercial architecture.

Commercial architects are having a good time. Through large organisations they get to work on large projects. The demands of the upper class from these large organisations in the cities are on the rise. Most architects get to work on attention-grabbing projects such as five-star hotels, resorts, hospitals and art galleries.



**Stainwell in Nalini Nayak's residence in Thiruvananthapuram,
Perforated brick walls create dappled patterns of light.**

Baker stays far away from this atmosphere. He is in the profession, yet far away from it in the commercial sense. "If you want to mass-produce houses, stay away from architects and engineers." Who would want to bear with an architect who says this!

Baker has been and still is a consultant to quite a few organisations, including the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) and the National Institute of Design (NID). "We'll do what appeals to us and avoid what doesn't". This would seem to be the attitude of some of the organisations towards his work.

When modern architecture was born, it was the belief that by the end of the 20th century everyone would have a house. With ultra-modern technology being propagated, construction materials would be mass-produced. Shelter would no longer be a problem as making a house had become an easy process, it was thought. But these hopes soon died. The profession was left in the hands of the government and the builders. The house almost became a mass-produced product for sale. Still, whether everyone can be provided with a house is not a certainty.

The government is faced with a difficult question: how to provide houses to 4.1 crore homeless families at the beginning of the 21st century? But this will remain a difficult proposition only if the effort is to provide only cement concrete houses. For a 250-square foot house with a reinforced concrete roof and concrete lintels made in such a manner as to withstand an earthquake, one will need 200 kg of steel, 100 bags of cement and 20,000 bricks. The cost of construction will be around Rs.50,000. To provide homes to all homeless people, 4.1 billion bags of cement, 8.2 crore quintals of steel and 820 billion bricks will be needed.

A sum of Rs.205 billion will be the total cost. However advanced a technology is used, such large-scale production of materials will not be possible. In order to produce the needed number of bricks, a substantial quantity of clay will have to be removed from fields. This will have an adverse affect on food grain production.



The Computer centre at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. Here Baker evolved an innovative system of curved double walls to save on cost and to conserve the energy that goes into air-conditioning a building of this scale and purpose.

Though it is clear from these gigantic numbers that such a solution is beyond the capacity of the nation, no political party has the courage to assert the fact. Baker has from time to time been criticising the working of the official organisations and other bodies involved in housing activity. He believes that it is futile to expect any grand results from them. "We don't need engineers or architects. If management is good, then housing schemes will automatically get the right direction," maintains Baker. He has always stressed the need to reduce the technological complexity involved. The present period necessitates alternative approaches to customary paths. It may no longer be possible to use energy-intensive and expensive materials, even if one desires to employ them.

Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, in an address to the nation, said: "The increased addiction to using cement is indicative of a mental paralysis." In various countries there is now an intense desire to move towards time-tested local methods of architecture. But a real movement

towards this objective can only be initiated when potential house buyers and builders feel the need for it.

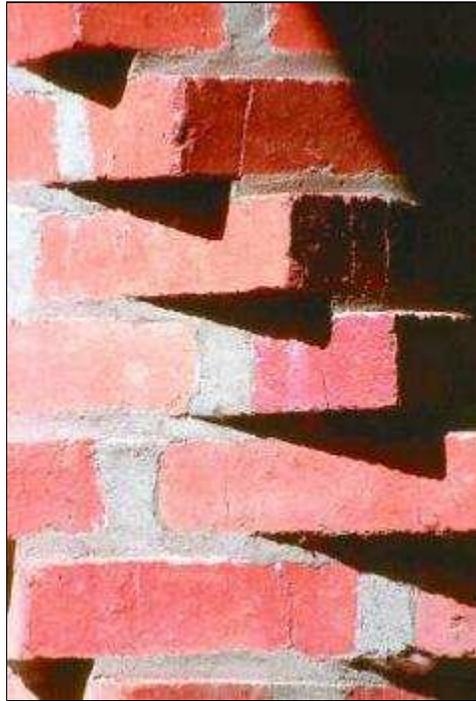
We are going through an era where an integrated approach is soon replacing the fragmented one of yesteryears. There can no longer be a division between ideals and practice, man and nature, beauty and utility. This can be witnessed in all spheres of work. Baker's architecture is thus a true manifestation of Indian philosophy. Some architects, engineers and bureaucrats have started considering the philosophy of Baker's approach. Quite a few have popularised his techniques. In Kerala, exposed brick houses with arched openings have become almost a fashion. These are labelled as 'eco-friendly' houses. But where will one come across Baker's soul in a commercialised approach? It will not reach the needy. The number of architects and engineers who proclaim that the Baker style means a house with arched openings is on the rise. Making fun of this trend, Baker says: "Thanks to the media, everyone has developed a liking for the cost-effective Baker house. That is why there is a demand for them. 'Give us a Baker-style house, the cost does not matter'."

What will a sensitive architect do in an atmosphere like this? Who will accept cost-effective technology? The upper and middle classes do not need it. The economically weaker sections aspire for cement concrete houses, the kind the upper classes have. So is it that this technology is for a very limited and small number of people?

In the past few years the demand for small buildings as opposed to skyscrapers has grown steadily. Architects have begun to talk about the importance of architecture that preserves the tradition of community living. It has become a belief that an architecture that favours society shall be profitable for both society and the architect.

Without using jargon, Baker has been expressing the same ideas for the past 50 years through his creations.

Baker's architecture is a reflection of his thoughts. He does not have any property other than the house in which he lives. He does not like to have more than four sets of shirts and trousers, all made of khadi fabric.



With his mastery over his medium, Baker creates a variety of textures and patterns by simple manipulation of the way in which bricks are placed in the wall.

He is continuously engaged in the quest for new ways to use any kind of waste, from paper to vegetables. Using bits of paper and cloth, he makes beautiful collages. Employing the 'origami' system he makes objects and animals for children. All this can be found in his handbag. How can today's generation come to terms with his simple living and minimal requirements? The new generation spends such a lot on education itself. They have to become a part of a life-threatening professional race and have to make quite a few adjustments. Then what is the future of Baker's architecture? Most architects want to leave their own stamp on their architecture. Their fee depends on the estimated cost of the project. Obviously, as the expenses increase so do the fees. A practice of paying an appropriate fee for effecting savings in costs has not yet been established. That is why there is no reason to economise. Baker's philosophy is for ordinary people. To spend as little as possible to run the household, to make do with what one has... such an attitude gets reflected in his architecture. He has a deep understanding of the little problems of everyday life. If one harvests rainwater rather than letting it run off, then one will save on the effort to go and fetch water; any woman in India will consider this. Baker goes ahead and implements it. Glare is to be avoided. The house should abound in soothing light and shade. This subconsciously affects us in a pleasant way. With this in mind Baker provides decorative *jaalis*. Houses that merge with the environment have always existed. Baker just continued the tradition. This is not an architect's art alone; rather it is art that has stemmed from man's requirements. Through architecture one can get an understanding of science, technology, art, social life, culture and geographical aspects. Architecture becomes a medium of expression.

Is a fan required to create air movement... is a lamp needed to provide light? Many people do not give such questions any thought. Fans and lamps can be avoided through appropriate planning. In India there is sunlight all round the year, which means that if water is stored in the southern part of the house, hot water can be made available. Garbage can be recycled.

Commercial-minded architects seldom give a thought to such things. Only a person like Baker has the courage for this, because his motive is not just to make money.

The daily struggle of a common man was expressed by Vibhutibhooshan Bandhopadhyaya as 'Pather Panchali', the song of the way. In a similar manner, Baker's architecture will have to be referred to as the architecture of the people. It shall always evolve. Till the time the common man exists, this art shall be there.

Atul Deulgaonkar's book in the Marathi has won several awards. The translators, Shrinivas Warkhandkar and Joginder Singh, are both practising architects. Joginder Singh has been in the process of doing a photographic documentation/study of Baker's work for the past two years and would appreciate the reader's response at jogi_singh@hotmail.com

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