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## Here was a Baker...

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*Laurie Baker, architect aged 90, died at 7:30 am on April 1, 2007.*

I have never written obituaries. Nor am I attempting to write one now. I am not an authority to speak on the person who has passed away. I have never seen him during his rather long lifetime. He has nothing to do with the profession I am in. He hasn't "influenced" me either, sticking to the literal meaning of the term. Due to this, whatever I write will lack the intensity which is essentially borne out of a personal bonding. Yet, why do I feel like writing about him? The answer is he was one of those people who has really impressed me with his life- a tangible form of many values I admire.

I can see many of my dear readers surprised to find a software engineer being inspired by an architect almost 2 generations older. Though it might sound quite unlikely, as a kid I was obsessed with buildings. I never thought I would become a software engineer, thanks to my persistent headaches- especially after the weekly hour-long computer labs at school. I was keen to become an "engineer who makes buildings". The illustrated architectural journals which reached our rented house, addressed to its former architect tenant might have been a catalyst. Some of my preoccupations were watching buildings being constructed and reading articles on architecture. Those days, the Malayalam newspaper "Mathrubhumi" used to run a series on low-cost architecture, the editions of which I still preserve. Though I had cleared the architecture aptitude test, there was a general opinion that a person with poor drawing skills could never be a good architect, which eventually led me into the large league of youth completing a B.Tech and taking up software jobs. I still have those headaches, though occasionally.

My affinity to architecture was not the sole reason that drew me to Baker. The fact is that he was not just an architect. It would be easier to explain what he was not. In his lifetime, there wouldn't be any role he hasn't played- anesthetist, missionary, gardener, cook, farmer, veterinarian, ambulance driver, carpenter, mason, bird- watcher, poet, cartoonist... More importantly, he was a master at all these trades. The only other person I know, who has put his hand to so many things is the great Malayalam writer, Vaikom Mohammed Basheer. What I saw in Baker, like in Basheer, was a complete human being.

Laurence Wilfred Baker graduated from the Birmingham School of Architecture in 1937. A chance encounter with Mahatma Gandhi during his 1940s stint in India with the Leprosy mission changed his life. Gandhi was quite impressed by

the young man who wore shoes made of pieces of waste cloth. It was the inspiration from Gandhiji that held Baker back in India. Later he married Dr. Elizabeth Chandy, a Keralite. The couple lived for 16 years in the Himalayas- where Baker built factories, educational, medical, social and religious buildings- before moving to Kerala. Here also, Baker began to make his mark especially after the construction of the Centre for Development Studies building in Trivandrum in the early 70's.

In hindsight, I feel that it was the Gandhi in Baker that attracted me. For my generation, Gandhi was locked up in books. Laurie demonstrated the most beautiful aspect of Gandhism: its pervasiveness in day-to- day life, how practical they are once you have assimilated them.

The basis of Baker's philosophy is respect for nature. One of the thumb rules Baker always followed was never to meddle with natural features. As The Indian Express mentioned in the title of its obit, for him "home was the extension of land". He acknowledged the geographical features of the land for construction and never tried to alter them. Never has he leveled a hill or filled a low- lying area with alien soil. Instead his buildings accommodated the slope of the land. You can often find a Baker house encircle a tree rather than uprooting it. By this, each of his works became a tribute to the nature surrounding it.

Another trait of his style was the selection of materials. Not many people aside from Baker follow the Gandhian principle that 'a building should be made from materials available within a 5 mile radius'. If the place had abundance of rock, Baker made the house with rock. As a result, not only was the cost reduced, but the building was also freed from the alien look, as it blended with its surroundings in colour and form. He avoided using cement and glass as much as he could, citing the enormous amount of energy that goes into their production.

Laurie Baker upheld truth in architecture. He believed in having a purpose for everything done in a building. No wonder he could never find out the logic of building a house with bricks, covering it with plaster and then painting bricks over it again!!! Baker's buildings never deceive you. They don't hide the material with which they are made of (usually brick, Baker's favorite). They smile at you with a newborn's innocence. They show you that plain "brick-red" is not the only colour bricks come in, and that their different colours can be combined to magnificent effect. They withstand nature's bashings better while their (plastered, painted) neighbors are covered with stains and dirt.

Baker homes were never designed in a studio - in fact he never had one! He always went to the building site, took every geographical and natural detail into consideration, talked extensively with his clients about their eating and sleeping habits, profession and hobbies before drawing the plan. So the house

he made for a poet was starkly different from the one he did for a government servant sans any creative preoccupation. Thus cartoonist Abu Abraham's house becomes unfit for singer Yesudas to live in. Baker was highly inspired by the uniqueness nature shows - how it makes each of its creation different from another one of same kind.

One of the reasons why I frequent the Indian Coffee House at Thampanoor, near Trivandrum's bus terminal and railway station, is the pleasure of being in a Baker building. (Other reason is their *masaladosa* with red *masala* inside) You can't find another perfect "coffee- house" building in Trivandrum. The spiral building almost 3 storey high made entirely of bricks has no stairs at all!!! The way to the top just winds by the side of the seats- You could get scared by the slope of the winding path, but I don't think anyone has ever slipped and fallen down. Waiters with stacks of plates in both hands walk up and down the slope at a rapid pace. This is what you call marriage of beauty with precision. I've often wondered why the Indian coffee house at Statue junction didn't have a nice building, despite being much older. It was last week that I learned that once there existed a beautiful coffee house building at the same location; I saw a Baker sketch of the old building too. He was very disappointed at the demolition of that old building for the present pompous multi-storeyed one.

One of my greatest regrets was not being able to convince my parents to build a Baker house when we thought of having a house of our own. They were skeptical like the majority of Keralites and went for a conventional house with square and rectangular rooms, covered all over with plaster and 'neatly' painted. Loads of cement and steel went into its making; still it has cracks all over its walls. It has lot of doors and windows, made of good quality timber. Yet inside, I am sweating. Incidentally, as I am writing this, the repainting is going on here (the third time in ten years). The cost involved would have been enough for Baker to build a small house!!!

I still dream of living in a Baker home- with rat-trap bonded brick walls giving insulation from outside temperature; with brick *jaalis* (cavities on walls) bringing cool air from outside and roof vents taking out the hot air; with circular and hexagonal rooms; with sunlight caught by the multi-colored (waste!) bottles on walls making kaleidoscopic images on mud- tiled floor- a home that is truly an extension of nature...

Baker has not built any high- rise buildings (except may be, the CDS complex). He never wished his buildings to rise above Kerala's coconut palm cover. He may not find a place among the elite league of Le Corbusiers or Lutyenses. Yet he towers over any architect as the person who showed thousands of poor that they too can afford a roof over their head. If you see the wonderful buildings at Chenkalchoola- Trivandrum's slum, you'll understand that they are not just 'roofs'.

It is not at all surprising that the Baker way couldn't attract admirers in large numbers in Kerala. People are too prejudiced and conventional to find the truth in Baker. When Baker model's popularity was at its peak, there indeed was a joke, "I want a low-cost (Baker model) house, no matter how expensive it is!!!" We are used to following trends blindly, never getting into the soul of things. I often wonder what would have happened if Baker style was able to make a wider footprint in Kerala. There wouldn't be any of the vulgar opulence we see today. More interestingly, we would have been liberated from all those prime-time paint and cement ads. Come on, can we dream of all this materialising in our consumerist culture?

Baker was a cartoonist and author par excellence. In the good number of articles about him that came after his death nowhere did I find mention of a caricature series titled "*Malayaliyude Mundu*" (Malayali's Dhoti). It was serialized in "Mathrubhumi" Weekly (in the '80s. I don't remember exactly when. I found them in the archives of old magazines at my native place). The series had captured the essence of Baker's style. Those simple lines are testimonials to Baker's observation skills- how he found uniqueness in each individual. It will be a surprise to find books titled "Rubbish by Baker" and "Baker's Mud". The former is about waste disposal, while the latter talks virtually everything on mud as a building material. After describing every aspect of construction using mud, with the help of neat detailed drawings, Baker asks, "So, who will build your mud house? If you have the time and inclination you can do it yourself!" How better can you talk about self-sufficiency?

A person of my generation who hasn't understood Baker has simply denied himself the chance of finding the Gandhi of our times. Indeed, in no personality of recent times could you find the essence of Gandhism with such conviction and clarity. His deeds never deviated from his words. While constructing a house for himself in Thiruvananthapuram, which he named "*Hamlet*", he practiced the same concepts which he tried to popularize, so that nothing could stop him from saying, "My life is my message".

As the builder and master of "Hamlet", who never had the confusion of "to be or not to be" when it came to his beliefs, passes away I would but echo Shakespeare's Antony:

**"Here was a Baker! When comes such another?"**