



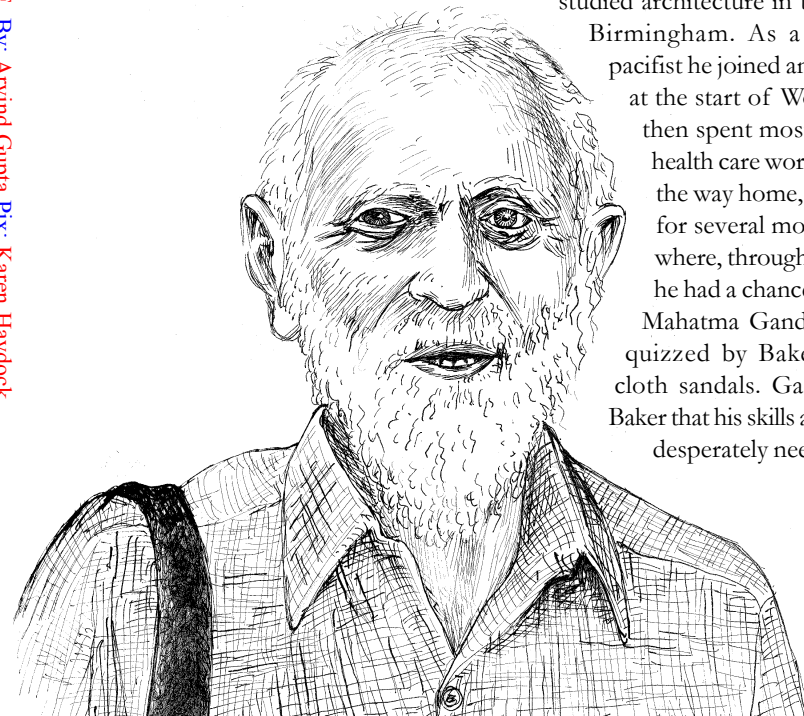
*"I never build for classes of people – high income, middle income or low income groups, tribals or fishermen. I only build for a Matthen, a Bhaskaran, a Muneer or a Sankaran."*

*-Laurie Baker*

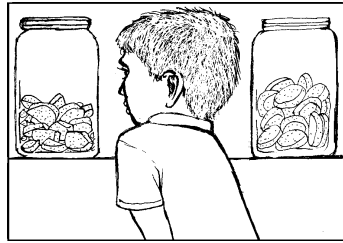
Laurie Baker was a rare architect who touched the lives of the poor. He built low-cost, low-energy, climatically suited and aesthetic houses for people's real needs.

Laurence Wilfred Baker was born in 1917 in Birmingham. He grew up and studied architecture in the mill town of

Birmingham. As a Quaker and a pacifist he joined an ambulance unit at the start of World War II, and then spent most of the war as a health care worker in China. On the way home, he was stranded for several months in Bombay where, through Quaker friends, he had a chance encounter with Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was quizzed by Baker's hand-made cloth sandals. Gandhi convinced Baker that his skills and expertise was desperately needed in India.



Baker learnt frugality and good value for money early in life. As a child he would spend his pocket money buying biscuits from the local bakery. He soon discovered that for the same money he could buy double the amount of broken biscuits. And the broken biscuits tasted just as good! This lesson he never forgot.



Deeply inspired by Gandhi, Baker returned to India a few months later and began building treatment centres for leprosy patients. In 1948, he married Dr. Elizabeth Jacob – a medical doctor from the Christian Medical College, Vellore. The couple then moved to a remote village in the hills of Pithoragarh in Uttar Pradesh and ran a hospital where Elizabeth was the only doctor and Baker was the rest of the hospital staff! When the American educationist Welthy Fisher wanted to set up the *Literacy House* in Lucknow she was told that there was only one architect in India who could translate her dream vision into a blueprint. Baker also designed *Noor Manzil* the first psychiatric hospital in Lucknow.

In the late sixties Baker returned to his wife's home state of Kerala and settled in Trivandrum. He started practicing as a full time architect only at the age of fifty! Baker organised his work as a designer-builder in the manner of a traditional Indian master craftsman. He never hired an office or an assistant,

and often sketched his plans on waste paper, designing largely on site.

Unlike architects who only drew 'lines on paper'

Baker was an expert builder – an adept mason, a skilled carpenter. His projects were executed not

by engineers but by teams of craftsmen he had himself trained. His hands-on approach with

no middlemen enabled him to cut costs to the

bone. He was deeply

COB is good for anything except height. It is particularly good for curved or round walls.



PISE or RAMMED EARTH is strong and ideal for solid, squat single storey houses.

ADOBE or SUN DRIED BRICKS can easily cope with two storey houses.



PRESSED BRICKS are smooth and very strong and can build three storeys.

WATTLE & DAUB is elegant and fine for seismic zones and can be done wherever there is cane or bamboo.



But parties blamed each other.....

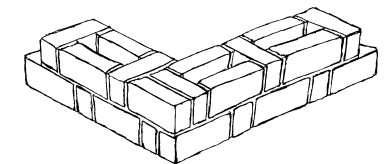
sensitive to the environment and seldom used energy guzzling steel or cement. He never failed to point out, "Cement is younger than me." This was true as energy intensive cement was introduced on a large scale only after the First World War.

It was in the Himalayas that Baker saw how traditional Indian architecture reflected thousands of years of trial-and-error research in energy efficiency. People used local stone and timber found within a few hundred yards of their houses. Seeing this reminded Baker of one of

Gandhi's beliefs – that all buildings should be made of materials found within 5-miles of the construction site.

Baker was not always able to follow that principle, but came close to it. He was profoundly hostile to glass and steel – both energy guzzlers. But he loved embedding coloured bottles in walls for kaleidoscopic light-effects. Bricks he loved and often laid them in *rat-trap* bonds to save 25% bricks and gain great insulation for the wall. His brick *jaalis* (wall cavities) brought in cool air from outside while roof vents pushed out the hot air. For mortar he used lime which in Kerala could be made on the spot using clamshells. He replaced steel and reinforced his slabs with split bamboos at one-fifth of the cost. His favourite material however, remained *MUD* – which used no fuel, could be found close by, and was free. Fifty-eight percent of all buildings in India were made of mud and had withstood the ravages of weather for hundreds of years. Mud was also completely reusable. You could tear down your old house, add water, and make a new one. That couldn't be done with glass and steel.

Baker used traditional materials, skills and designs - tried and tested for thousands of years to construct comfortable homes and offices that had running water, electricity and sometimes garages. He was convinced that 'architecture was too important to be left to architects'. He wrote a dozen do-it-yourself booklets with titles like *How to reduce building costs*, *Rubbish* and *Mud* illustrated with his own pen-and-ink diagrams. Many of these have



Rat-trap masonry saves money by using 25% less bricks - and also makes a building better insulated because of the air spaces.



Laurie and Elizabeth Baker

been translated into regional languages. Two of the more recent booklets *Rural Community Buildings* and *Cost Reduction for Primary School Buildings*, were published on Baker's 80th birthday. Two of his most celebrated buildings are the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) and a modest *Coffee House* near Trivandrum's bus station.

Recycling came naturally to Baker. His bathrooms, for example, used bits and pieces of waste glass as tiles. He embedded several hundred broken roof tiles every foot or two

in his building's concrete roof, a signature Baker technique. The checkerboard broken tiles reduced the amount of concrete by 30%. He never wanted his buildings to rise above Kerala's coconut palm cover!

Baker was not just an architect. He embraced life to the fullest and on various occasions became an anaesthetist, missionary, gardener, cook, farmer, veterinarian, ambulance driver, carpenter, mason, poet, cartoonist etc.

Baker was conferred several honorary doctorates. The British government bestowed the Order of the British Empire and MBE. In 1990 he received the inaugural UNO Habitat Award and UN Roll of Honour. On various occasions he was inducted into many high profile government committees. In 1990 he was awarded the Padma Shri. But he was happiest to be made an Indian citizen in 1988. Elizabeth and Baker adopted three children – son Tilak and daughters Vidya and Heidi.

While constructing his own house *Hamlet* he practised the same concepts he preached and popularized. Indeed, *his life was his message*. He died peacefully at the ripe age of 90, on April fool's day 2007. Even in death he pulled a fast one on his detractors. As the builder of *Hamlet* he had no confusion about his role or identity *to be or not to be*. In the end one can only echo Shakespeare's Mark Antony: "*Here was a Baker! When comes such another?*"

