

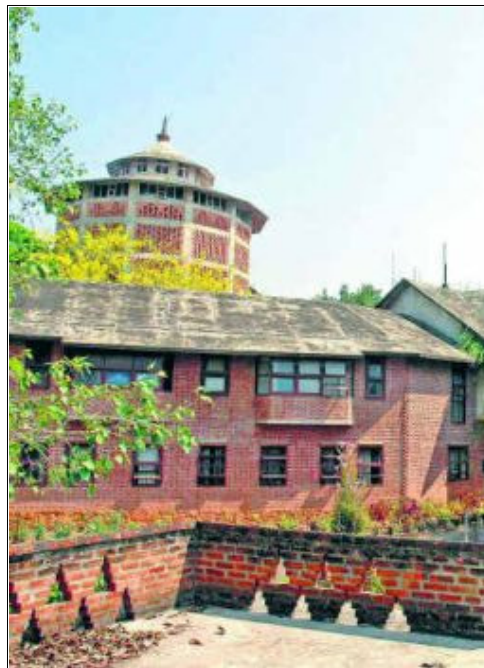
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A legacy rooted in simplicity and integrity

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Laurie Baker influenced a movement of honest architecture, not only in Kerala but also in the entire country. He had a legion of architects popularising his methods, although he was sceptical about the work of some of them, who used "low-cost" more as label than as value.

PHOTOS: S. GOPAKUMAR



ATTENTION TO DETAIL: The Centre for Development Studies building in Thiruvananthapuram, which won wide acclaim for Laurie Baker.

From the tumult of the city, you walk up the steps to "The Hamlet," Laurie Baker's home in Thiruvananthapuram, and immediately you become aware of the chirping of birds.

Trees spread their foliage over the tiled roof of the house. The brickwork follows the contours of the sloping land, guiding the fresh breath of the wind and the pleasant hues of light and shade in through the enclosed space. The building seems as though it has belonged to the place from time immemorial, growing with the trees, moulded by nature — never a violation, never an intrusion.

Baker's home itself is a statement on his personality. His entire work as an architect was the extension of his personality. The British-born architect, who died in his home on April 1 at the age of 90, leaves behind an architectural legacy rooted deep in simplicity and integrity.

Heritage of simplicity

These were values dear to Kerala lifestyle once. If Kerala can boast of no monumental ancient architecture structures, the ones that flaunt the glory of emperors and kings, the reason is not far to

seek. Even kings were the epitome of simplicity here, making do with humble palaces and small comforts. The "naalukettu" and "ettukettu" types of houses, where the rich of the land lived, were not meant to flaunt wealth. These were simply homes to live peacefully, shielded from the tropical sun and rain.

Somewhere along the line, Kerala began to forget these values. Flashy concrete structures began to take over the countryside as money for the extravagance flowed in from Gulf expatriates. It required Laurie Baker, who reached the State in the mid 1960s and made Thiruvananthapuram his home in 1970, to force Kerala to reinvent its old values.

He influenced a movement of honest architecture, not only in Kerala but also in the entire country, with organisations such as Housing and Urban Development Corporation adopting his eco-friendly, low-cost building methods to provide a clean living environment to the poor. He has a legion of architects popularising his methods, although he had often expressed scepticism about the work of some of them, who use "low-cost" more as label than as value that a country with more than 40-million homeless families had to perforce uphold.



He would work the building round a tree rather than cut it, as seen on the CDS premises.

Eugene Pandala, architect, says Laurie Baker's biggest contribution was that he gave respectability to low-cost building. He showed that "low-cost" did not mean low quality. It could mean aesthetics and the happiness of living within one's means, without pretensions, with comfort. Baker had built thousands of homes and scores of institutions such as schools, hospitals, Government buildings and churches. In each case, whether the house of a famous dignitary or the dwelling of fisherman, the textures and architectural manners of his work were based on the principle of economising on materials.

Evolving design

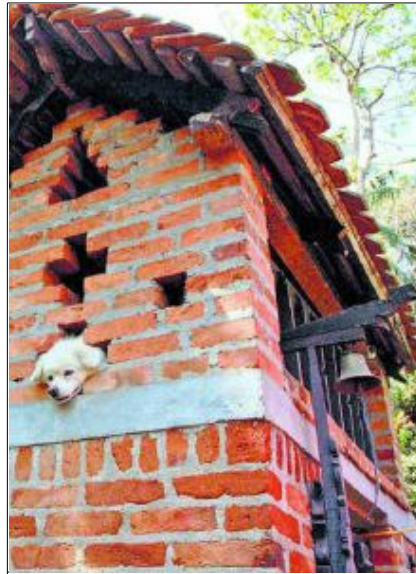
The men at his construction sites used to call him their "head mason." His initial design was but the beginning of the evolution of something beautiful in his gifted hands.

Until ill health and old age came in the way, his direct presence at the sites of each of his project used to be unavoidable.

He would teach his masons new brick-laying patterns emerging from his artistic fancy and keep

watching them at work till they gave him just what he wanted. He would keep watching the direction of the wind and the sun and go on improvising on the design as the construction progressed. He would work the building round a tree rather than cut it to clear the way.

He used to give great attention to minute details of his buildings, observing the habits and needs of his clients. He used to derive a mischievous kind of pleasure surprising his clients with something they had always wanted in their homes, but had not thought of asking him at any stage of the design or construction process. It can, for instance, take the form of a right-sized nook in the brickwork by the side of the seat for the master of the house to hide something from his mother-in-law.



Even pets engaged the master architect's attention.

Even pets used to receive his considerate attention. On the steps of "The Hamlet," as you ring the bell, you can hear the patter of a Pomeranian's feet up a small flight of steps inside.

Then, you find the dog craning its neck through an opening in the brickwork and examining you closely. Satisfied, it withdraws its head and gives out a couple of yelps to announce the visitor.

As the door is opened, it sniffs around you for a few seconds and curls up beneath a chair, its responsibilities over.

<http://www.hindu.com/pp/2007/04/07/stories/2007040700510100.htm>

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Building from Local materials