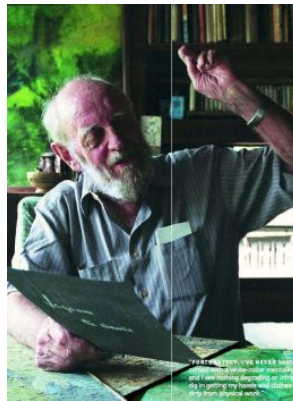


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`Call a brick wall a brick wall'

SUNDAR RAMANATHAIYER

A collection of responses that Laurie Baker made to questions on himself and his philosophy and architecture.



"Fortunately, I've never been cursed with a white-collar mentality and I see nothing degrading or infra dig in getting my hands and clothes dirty from physical work."

Laurence Wilfred Baker built affordable dream homes for hundreds of people. He helped them sort out their "real needs", and most of his new clients and masons, workers and associates soon started calling him `Daddy' as he became their lifetime friend. The following are excerpts from a unique collection of lengthy responses to questions on himself and his philosophy and architecture, which Baker put down "in his beautiful handwriting, on yellow cut-waste newsprint paper" for Sundar Ramanathaiyer, who named the house that Baker built for him in Thiruvananthapuram `Bakerland'.

What were you doing in North India before you moved to the South?

Much the same as I do here in the South. While we were in the remote Himalayan region, my wife had her hospital; she was the doctor, surgeon, gynaecologist, etc. and I was the rest of the hospital staff. I was very much involved in all the hospital work - from sweeping and maintenance, to lab and dispensary work, nursing, acting as "theatre sister" and all the other operating theatre staff, midwife, anaesthetist, and so on. And of course I had to build our home and hospital - the hospital continuously growing as the years and the needs increased. When we eventually had other hospital help, I was able to do more architectural work. We opened our own schools and designed and built them, helped with others' house building. Occasionally, I went off down to the plains to design mainly hospitals, colleges, schools, libraries, ashrams - for example, I built the first psychiatric hospital in India and built the campus for the first Adult Literacy campaign in India.

What sort of buildings did you build in North India?

It is interesting that now, when anyone asks who this Laurie Baker is, they are told: he's that person who builds low-cost houses. But in fact I think my output of other buildings, factories, educational,

medical, social and religious buildings, would in fact total up to far more square footage than my houses. And in my opinion, the achievement of reducing costs in most of these other spheres is much more difficult - mainly in persuading the clients that they needn't spend so much - and much more important too. Building houses is an individual matter and people can spend as much money as they want to - but public building is very often incredibly and stupidly wasteful and extravagant - and while you can talk and discuss with a man and his wife about their house needs and dreams, dealing with committees and government bodies and so on is much more of a headache.

If by "what sort of building?" you meant "what did they look like?", the answer is, somewhat in the indigenous style of wherever the buildings were, and of course, they were always shaped and influenced by local materials, topography, climate, people, and so on.

What are your sources of inspiration?

When anyone comes to me to design a building for them I first want to know who they are, what sort of people they are, what sort of a building they want, what they will do in the building, what the site is like and the weather, and so on. As all this data and information comes to me, the form of the building they hope for takes shape in my head, and I start putting it down on paper. I don't think I even start with any preconceived ideas - the real inspiration comes from the person and the place and the function to which they want to put the building to. I am also conditioned by all sorts of practical considerations - how big is the land, does it suffer from excessive weather (strong winds or rains), are there beautiful views from the site, are there other nearby buildings that I have to "live with", how much money is to be spent, and so on.

Then, naturally I'm concerned about surroundings that already have controlled their own pattern of buildings in the neighbourhood. The various styles of architecture are all the result of thousands of years of ordinary people trying to make buildings that keep out the rain and wind and sun by using whatever materials there were, lying around or growing in the place where they live. So I see what principles have developed over centuries - in other words, I see what has resulted in this particular area from their forefathers' study of local conditions and materials - and then apply these principles to what I want to do for my client. Sometimes, the local architecture is so beautiful and so apt that I feel it would be foolish and an affront to try and design in any other way.

So I don't think I've ever been inspired by what other architects have done but more by what ordinary craftsmen have created. By that I don't mean to say I dislike the work of other architects - much of their work I like and enjoy - but my point is that what they do is not what makes me want to build in a particular way or style - but what has slowly evolved empirically often gives me a great kick, and I want to be part of that continuing evolution or progression. The result is that what I build in Uttar Pradesh or in Gujarat or West Bengal are all different from each other and different from what I build in Kerala. I think probably this term that seems to be used, 'a Baker style', is not correct because what Baker does varies from place to place. The so-called Baker style in Kerala is very different from the Baker style in Gujarat because the inspiration or the sources of inspiration are entirely different.

Wherever you build, you achieve cost-effectiveness and economy in your construction. How do you manage that?

The indigenous styles of architecture that I mentioned before are the proven demonstration of how to use local materials economically. The use of local materials is an example of economy because there are no transport costs. These styles show that people have discovered that there is a right way and a wrong way of putting materials together so that they are strong and durable. A wall, for example, is not necessarily stronger because it is thicker. The bonding together of a few stones is much stronger than the heaping together of a lot of stones.

Then, these days, we often do things 'because it is done that way'. But often, times have changed,

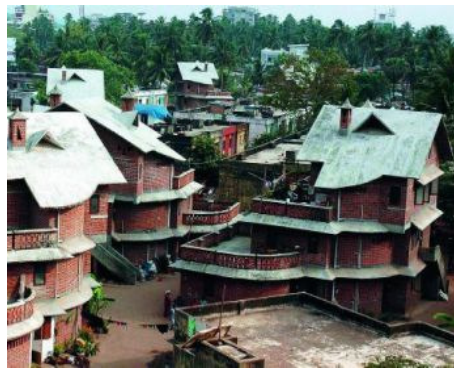
ways of living have changed, so often we do a lot of unnecessary things in building, which needn't have been done at all. So if something is not necessary, don't put it in. That immediately is an economy.

Only occasionally is really 'new' material or 'new' technique an economy. There is very little that is actually new - and when it is new, it is rarely cost-effective. So, one has to decide whether the advantages of using a new material are really a benefit worth the extra cost. If they are, well and good, but if, for your particular needs, they are not, then economise and don't use them.

In passing, I must also mention that 'low cost' or 'cost reduction' is not only concerning economy. Most modern building materials are manufactured articles (like burnt bricks or steel or glass or cement). Their respective costs are one important consideration but just as important is the question of how much energy (or fuel) was used in their manufacture.

What are the basic differences between modern concrete architecture and your architecture?

For one thing, I use as little concrete as possible. Modern concrete work displays a lot of concrete, both as a material and a system of construction, while I like to use local materials as much as possible and avoid as much concrete as possible. This obviously and inevitably makes our styles different from each other. I am rarely impressed by fashions but am very, very impressed by the solid lasting beauty and form of traditional architecture. I can see that if you are keen on geometry, the facade of a modern concrete skyscraper, made up of hundreds of identical concrete units, can interest you, while I marvel that people can live in, and use, endlessly identical units. To me, a tree is beautiful; no two trees are identical - I think this is incredible! All of us have two eyes, one nose, one mouth, one chin, two ears, yet, we are all different. To me this is even more incredible and fascinating, and in the same way, you can go to an old town or village and it obviously has a special style about it - yet every building is different, but it 'agrees with' its neighbours.



Flats Baker built for slumdweller in Thiruvananthapuram.

Then, of course, I don't like the idea of millions of people all trying to live in one place, so I don't see the real need for high-rise buildings to the extent we put them up these days. So, again, the results of my work are bound to be different from those of the modern concreters.

I also enjoy the look of building materials - especially the hand-made materials. Bricks to me are like faces. All of [them are made of] burnt mud, but they vary slightly in shape and colour. I think these small variations give tremendous character to a wall made of thousands of bricks, so I never dream of covering such a unique and characterful creation with plaster, which is mainly dull and characterless. I like the contrast of textures of brick, of stone, of concrete, of wood. I don't like such things to be painted all over with pink - or green, or even pink and green. Another thing is that I dislike facadism - the sides and backs of my buildings are just as interesting as the front. I don't like something special or something nice for the front only. The most important part of the house is the interior, where a family lives and express themselves - the interior of a hall or a church or an auditorium is far more important than the front, according to my way of thinking, so I don't take on a client only interested in making a show on the front. Whereas so many modern concrete structures are very much facades for show.

What is waste in construction and how can it be eliminated?

There are many types of waste. I've already told you about facades. I think they are one of type of waste - and the waste costs a lot of hard cash and energy. All these little fashions and gimmicks are only for looks and are not necessary. These days we can work out the desirable structural stability, on almost all materials - we have our data and our formulae, but we don't believe in the results these formulae give us. People add on a "factor of safety". Either the formula is wrong or unreliable, or else the user has no faith in it. Of course, we are told it is people who are unreliable - they will only use half the cement and sell the other half. The formulae I use, I believe in, and I make sure that the construction is done properly according to the formulae. Not to have faith is a waste. To support corruption and adulteration is also a waste.

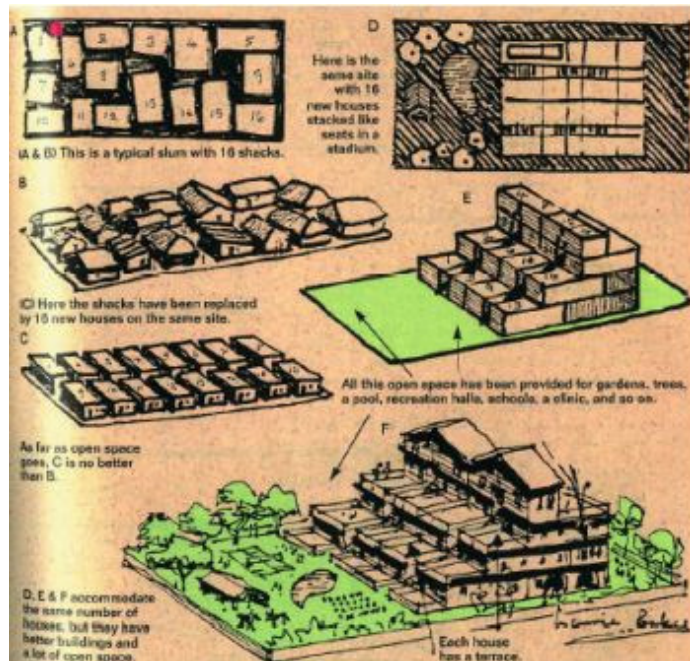
What is `truth' in architecture?

We all know that this word `truth' is very difficult to define - and probably these days very few people want it to be defined!

Very roughly speaking, my `truth' ideas are equivalent to the old adage of calling a spade a spade - I like to call a brick wall a brick wall. I've already explained that I like materials. I like their individual looks, their own textures, I like the varieties - again a face is made of two eyes, one nose and one mouth idea. So, I see no good reason, for example, of building a brick wall and then covering it all over with a dull plaster or perhaps then colouring the plaster to make it "look nice". I think the bricks looked nice as they were! And, of course, I just think it is plain stupidity to build a brick wall, plaster it all over and then paint lines on it to make it look like a brick wall. I think it is equally untruthful to cover it all over with tiles shaped to look like bricks. Or another variation of untruthfulness is to plaster it and then paint it to look like marble!

Another example of a lie is the one I've already hinted at, by following the practice of façadism. Churches often put up marvellous fronts of great height and covered all over with this and that, while the real church behind this magnificent front is a little more than a miserable barn.

Quite apart from the whole business of truth and/or lies, the question I always want to ask people who like façadism in its different forms is who do you think you are impressing? We all automatically assess situations where a person (or persons) likes to appear to be something to everyone else but to himself, or at home, he is something quite different and, again, in actual fact he is known to be two-faced. In the same way, I think very few people are impressed or are taken in by the fancy front of a building - they know, or assume, that behind the building is little more than a pigsty.



One of Baker's sketches. "To produce the final drawing is a matter of an hour or so of tracing out what I have roughly worked out on scrap paper."

Why do you use varied shapes, circles and hexagons, while most conventional architects use squares, rectangles and straight lines?

I think I'm subconsciously often strongly influenced by nature, and much of nature's `structural work' is not straight or square. A tall reed of grass in a windy, wild terrain is a long cylinder or a hollow tube; tree trunks and stems of plants that carry fruit and leaves are usually cylindrical and not square. Curves are there to take stresses and strains and to stand up to all sorts of external forces. On top of it all, they look good and beautiful and are infinitely more elegant than straight lines of steel and concrete.

Shapes are also interesting and exciting, and some shapes are more economical than others. For example, the perimeter, or enclosing wall, of a square or rectangular space of, say, 100 square feet is longer than the circumference wall round a circle enclosing the same 100 square feet. But again, there is nothing in my thinking or planning that makes me use only a curve instead of a straight line. In general, I think the current international style of high-rise (and other) buildings tends to be cubist and angular - there is a preponderance of straight lines in plan and elevation. To me, it becomes unpleasant, for example, when a gentle, curving countryside is levelled off and straight roads are built and long straight rows of little square boxlike houses are put up. Another example of the charm of curves is found in the pleasure people express when they see an arch instead of a square lintel or beam.

You are an architect without an office!

You mustn't assume that because I don't have an office or staff that I think everyone should do likewise. First of all, I really enjoy my profession, that is, designing buildings. I have already explained that I feel it is essential and enjoyable to get to know my clients and try and work out what they want and put it on to paper so that it can be built. Personally, I cannot see how I can, or why I should, go through all that effort to see them and talk with them and discuss their way of life and see their site and so on and then tell a partner or junior to "do a plan". The plan and design and details all form themselves in my head as I talk and listen and see. To me it is very good fun to try and work out a good plan and design for people who have privately confessed to wanting all sorts of personal peculiarities in the design of their house or building!

Then, while I am working out the plan - the thickness of walls, the size of doors and windows, the shape of rooms and spaces, and so on - I have to draw them out more or less accurately, if roughly and sketchily. To produce the final drawing is a matter of an hour or so of tracing out what I have

roughly worked out on scrap paper. In my rough plan, I don't put in all little details, and it is no effort to add these to the final tracing as I do it. So where, I often wonder, is the need for a junior or a draftsman or a tracer?

Another factor is that in order to build, I have to produce some very simple drawings to a given scale for the authorities. These are 'main idea' drawings and not working drawings for the contractor or builders to know what to do when they start building. As I rarely use contractors but prefer to engage masons, carpenters, coolies, etc., whom I know and who regularly work with me, I don't need to do these endless working drawings because they all know how I like doors and grills and frames and brick bonds and how I don't like reinforced concrete lintels and beams, etc. So, actually, by working in this way, I eliminate middlemen; I eliminate an enormous amount of 'drawing office work', and I have time and deliberately prefer to spend most of my time on the building site with the workers, and indeed, I really enjoy actually helping to build. Fortunately, I've never been cursed with a white-collar mentality and I see nothing degrading or infra dig in getting my hands and clothes dirty from physical work.

Again, please do understand that I don't, therefore, think that all architects should work in this way. I build in order to enjoy creating something that other people will want and enjoy. To belong to a profession or to have a title, or letters after my name, is completely irrelevant and not what I mean by 'being an architect'. The more I can do this without the trappings of an office, the happier I am, and the more time I have for creating, the better.

Several young architects and masons are into the so-called Baker style. What advice do you have for them?

Mainly, I want them to understand why this so-called Baker style has come about - especially, it is in order that ordinary people can afford to build houses for themselves. Then, they must understand how cost reduction is achieved. Fancy brickwork or fancy shapes for rooms and buildings do NOT make a building Baker style. I think they must be consistent, that is, they should only think in terms of affordability, of suitability for the clients' needs, of being truthful and honest in their approach to design, and they should definitely not do anything merely to be showy or outstanding. I think that if they really believe in the right principles, they won't want to do big, impressive or expensive buildings. In our country today, we need to care for all our countrymen and to use our resources carefully. Any excesses, any wasteful or unnecessary use of materials, are a slap in the face to those who have no home and no hope of ever getting a home as long as we squander the wealth of our land.

<http://www.frontline.in/stories/20070420005013000.htm>

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