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Master mason

G. SHANKAR

Perhaps more than for his architecture, people loved him for his wonderful qualities as a human being.



Baker's sense of humour welcomes visitors to 'The Hamlet', his home, which has the doghouse above the door.

I was a student just out of school in Kerala when I first met Laurie Baker. A friend had invited me over to visit the site where, he said, a foreigner was building a house for his family. There I saw this fair-skinned man engaged in a heated argument with his client, my friend's father, a mathematics professor.

Among other things, the professor wanted a cylindrical shape for his home, to get the benefit of maximum space, and six bedrooms, one each for his five sons and the other for himself and his wife. The argument was about the bedrooms.

I still remember Baker asking the professor, "Look, Mr. Namboodiri, you have five sons, all of them brilliant students. They will all start flying very soon and will go away. Finally, an old man and an old woman will be all alone in this house. Are you sure that you still want six bedrooms?"

The professor was adamant. He said, "Yes, I do want six bedrooms. As long as my sons are with me, they should have their own rooms."



Baker with his wife, Elizabeth, at their home in Thiruvananthapuram.

I was fascinated by the discussion that Baker had with his client that day. It was my first encounter with the man. I had never heard about him before. It was much before I knew anything about architecture or decided to make it my vocation. Several years later, I visited the house that Baker had built for my friend's family. The professor was long gone. The children had all flown away. Their mother, now quite old, was alone in that three-storied house. There were cobwebs in every nook and corner, on the roof and on the spiral staircase. Clearly, nobody climbed upstairs any longer.

I told her that I had first met Baker on that very site, years earlier, when he had been warning her husband about the futility of building a bedroom for each of their five sons. The old woman clasped my hand and cried for a while.

It was one of my formative impressions about Laurie Baker. Later, I went on to study architecture. In college, we were exposed to a range of architectural styles. We were taught an excess of them really, Buddhist, English, Victorian, Edwardian, Byzantine, Columbian, you name it. But we were never taught how to make a small house, within five cents of land, for five adults, and with only Rs.50,000. This is the Indian reality. Instead, we were taught how to build buildings in unlimited time, with unlimited budgets.

But, fortunately, by then, "Baker buildings" were happening all around us. The shape of those buildings used to fascinate us. It was from then on that I started taking note of Baker professionally, as an architect. The prestigious low-cost complex of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram had already been built by Baker and became a rallying point for many of us students and architects.

During vacations, we used to frequent all the Baker buildings, to observe his art at close quarters. It was not just the miraculous range of new building materials used by him that fascinated us. The rare beauty of the interiors, the spaces that he created where light and air flowed freely, all of it was a new experience for us.

After graduating, I went to Delhi. There, I had a peep into the other side of architecture. Baker took a number of factors into consideration before he decided the architecture of a building - the site, the climate, the client, the children and many such criteria. But in Delhi, I was introduced to architecture that was totally faceless. You did not need to know who the client was. It was as if you were building for anybody. It was architecture without values. It was a quagmire of corruption, pretensions and ego. It was a different platform altogether.

In about three years, I decided to go back to Kerala and Baker. I found that it was the right path, the one along which Baker had opted to walk alone.

But that itself was a problem. Laurie Baker used to work alone. He used to describe the box of instruments that he carried with him as his "office". There were a lot of people who wanted access to Baker. But Baker was not available. I felt, therefore, that some kind of a democratic movement should be formed to foster Baker's technology, to take it forward. That was why I decided to start the Habitat Technology Group in Thiruvananthapuram. For me, it was a sort of a political action too, for people-friendly architecture, for relating to people in a better way and, especially, for focussing on the poor - ideas dear to Laurie Baker.



**A view of the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, which Baker designed.
He had a deep, genuine concern for nature and trees.**

I used to meet Baker at times. But it was still a very distant relationship. I was never really close to Baker then. I decided I needed to study more and chose to go abroad for my masters. Once again Baker became the inspiration. I studied at the very same school where Baker had once been a student (in 1937), the Birmingham School of Architecture. As I was leaving for England, Baker gave me a reference letter, in which, among other things, he said of me, "I know of no other young person in India who can take this technology forward." To me, it was a blessing from a great master, which came quite early in my career.

After I came back, I used to frequent the meetings and conferences attended by Baker and listen to his speeches and lectures. As I moved closer to him, I realised that there was no conflict between the man's words and deeds. His sleeping bag, for instance, was made of khadi. He wore only simple clothes and simple shoes. There is a well-known anecdote about Baker's meeting with Gandhiji in Bombay, soon after he came to India (from China where, during the Second World War, he had been a British missionary architect and health worker looking after people suffering from leprosy). The first thing that struck Gandhiji about Baker was his shoes, which he had fashioned out of pieces of waste cloth. As the story goes, Gandhiji took the "Chinese cloth shoes" in his hands and, soon after Baker had demonstrated how they were made, asked Baker if he could stay back in India and not return to his native England.

Baker was truth personified. I have seen no one else like him. His life itself was a message. I have not met Gandhiji. So, for me, Baker remains the only true great man I have known. His words, clothes, humour, buildings, everything personified his ideas and ideals. His concern for nature, for trees, for the common people, for India, for Kerala was a genuine, deep concern.

I still remember an occasion when he was at work in a housing colony for Indian Administrative Service officers in Thiruvananthapuram. He used to go there every day. The buildings were all of different shapes and sizes. It was really a museum of different buildings, a beautiful mixture of shapes. But one fine morning when he arrived there, he saw a young mango tree being cut down. He did not say a word but quietly went back to his car. He never returned to the IAS colony again.

Man of conviction

Circumstances force people to make compromises. Dilutions do happen in our lives. But Baker was uncompromising in his convictions. That is truly the trait of a great man. He would not compromise on his beliefs. I have never seen an architect like him. The man was very clear about what he wanted. The cutting down of a tree hurt him so much that he had to leave immediately, never to come back.

His clientele included a range of people, from the humble fisherman to the Chief Secretary of the State. But he never differentiated between people. He used to say, "I never build for classes of people, HIG [high income group], MIG, LIG, tribals [tribal people], fishermen and so on. But I will build only for a Matthew, a Bhaskaran, a Muneer, or a Sankaran." Baker never built for unknown people. He built for people with names and faces. He believed that every person had a name, a face and a personality.

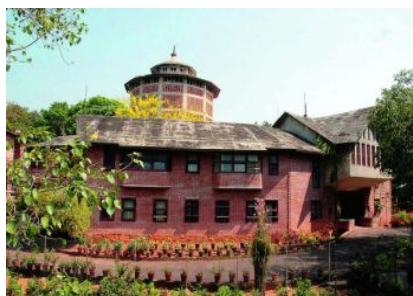
Another delightful facet of the man was his uncanny sense of measurement. He would go to a building site with a bunch of pegs and a bundle of strings in his pocket and would make the measurements himself, using his feet. He never worked from drawings. He used to go to the site and discover things. At the site, he would say, suddenly, "Why don't we put the window here so that it will open out on to that particular view."

As I said earlier, Baker often worked alone. He was also a good mason. On the day he won the World Habitat Award (1992), I was so happy that I had to be the first man at his door to congratulate him. I reached there early in the morning, at seven, but Baker had already left. His wife told me I could catch him at his worksite, a few kilometres away. When I went to the site, there, to my amazement, was Baker, perched precariously on a sloping roof winding wires, immersed in his work. I have seen such an attitude towards one's karma only in one other person, E.M.S. Namboodiripad.

Laurels and awards hung lightly on him. At several places in north India, in New Delhi, in Ahmedabad, I have seen people revering Baker. But not in Kerala, where he made his home. He was never invited to teach students. He was ignored by the architects' bodies. Some even "pooh-poohed" him as a "brick-layer". His greatest wish, to be an Indian citizen, was granted late, only in 1988. He was subsequently awarded the Padma Shri. The British government honoured him with the Order of the British Empire. But for Baker, becoming an Indian citizen was his only true achievement.

Baker came East from England as a volunteer architect attached to a mission during the war and lived an amazing life in China and north India looking after leprosy patients and building hospitals, schools, libraries, ashrams and homes. He met Elizabeth Jacob, the Malayalee doctor who later became his wife, while nursing patients in Mumbai at her brother's hospital. Baker arrived in Kerala 35 years ago and immediately struck a chord with ordinary people, soon after he began demonstrating that homes could be built for even Rs.3,000.

But he was not merely a builder of low-cost homes. He had the amazing ability to organise space. He used to create space like a magician for his clients to drink in, to meditate in, to think in. He had a lot of concern for beauty. He taught us how beautiful a brick could be and to look closely at its colour and texture; that no two bricks are the same and that together they create a wonderful mosaic; about the ruggedness of stone; and so on. He was the first one to call our attention to natural building materials and to the importance of using a variety of indigenous styles of architecture, a passion he imbibed from Gandhiji. He was against ostentation or façadism in architecture. He disliked falsehood and deceit.



Another view of the CDS. One of the most prominent early building complexes designed by Baker, was a source of inspiration for a generation of architects.

Baker influenced a generation of architectural engineers, who are now trying to further his vision in their own different ways. He taught us the need to relate to our clients; about truthfulness in architecture; the importance of cost-effective, energy-efficient building materials; about cutting corners; and of making truthful choices. He taught us to say no to cement, to the cutting down of trees and to expensive materials. He told us not to squander money, materials or energy; never to design buildings by sitting in isolation at a desk in an office; and to trust and learn from the "inherited ability" of local people to build effectively and well for themselves with limited resources.

Surely, it was not a faceless crowd that attended his funeral on April 2 at the Christ Church cemetery in Thiruvananthapuram, where he was laid to rest inside the common vault he had designed a few years earlier. Most of those who came there were people whom Baker would have recognised immediately and people who lived in homes that Baker had built for them. Once Baker built a home for anyone, he became theirs, their family friend, a person who knew all about them.

Baker was a great cartoonist. He used to see the social reality of India with the characteristic sense of humour that was also the most endearing quality about him. Perhaps more than for his architecture, people loved him because he was a wonderful human being.

(As told to R. Krishnakumar in Thiruvananthapuram.)

G. Shankar is the founder and chief architect of Habitat Technology Group, a prominent organisation in the building sector in India, which draws its inspiration from Laurie Baker's architectural style and philosophy.

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Appropriate Architectural Practice