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## Building blocks of simplicity

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**Laurie Baker was influenced by Gandhi and applied low cost building techniques in his projects.**

Laurie Baker, the eminent architect, who made India his home, passed away recently leaving behind an inspiring philosophy and legacy. His approach to architecture was radical in the sense that it assimilated our indigenous traditions, eco-friendliness, economy and simplicity in a truly modernist style. His statement that “a building should be truthful” encapsulates his approach to architecture. This truthfulness derives its essence from the pragmatism and minimalism of the architectural elements within the broader socio-economic and ecological contexts. This is what made Laurie Baker a popular one-man mission and his designs, a signature style.

A chance meeting with Gandhi in Bombay in 1945 proved to be a turning point in young Baker’s life. After graduating in architecture from the Birmingham School of Architecture in 1937, he had volunteered for a group called Quakers to provide medical help to the British soldiers in the Japan-China War. He served in the group for three years in China and Burma but his ill health forced him to return home.

### Visit to India

On his way back to Britain, he had to wait for a couple of months in Bombay and during this period he met Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi had expressed his concern for the need of housing for the poor particularly in the Indian villages. He told Baker that India needed committed architects. This meeting inspired Baker to return to India in 1945 as the member of a leprosy mission.

Initially, he lived in Kerala as a guest of Dr PJ Chandy. Subsequently, he travelled extensively that exposed him to the poverty in the villages as well as the cultural diversity. He was struck by the architectural diversity of India and the richness of its localised traditions.

He found that every region had its own architectural style depending upon the climatic factors and the locally available material. One common element that he found was mud which was recyclable and was extensively used everywhere and that these structures stood for ages. Baker felt that native knowledge and practices need to be preserved.

During his travel in India, he realised that a patient’s recovery is faster in a familiar environment. This made him construct hospitals and schools with locally available material. Since he utilised the services of local labourers, he started instructing them with drawings and illustrations.

For 16 years, Baker built and operated schools and hospitals in north India and during this time he married Dr Elizabeth Chandy, a co-worker and sister of Dr PJ Chandy. In the early 60s, the Bakers settled down in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, after a brief stay in Vagamon, in Kottayam.

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## **Baker's influences**

Laurie Baker's upbringing in the Quaker philosophy, Gandhian influence, his commitment to the social cause and a deep understanding of the Indian culture shaped his vision. He built modern buildings with traditional techniques and material.

He redefined the concept of low cost housing as it was misunderstood as low quality housing. He said: "low-cost does not reduce or lessen structural stability and durability." According to him, Indian architectural history is testimony to this. Most of the houses are made of mud or bricks baked at the site are still standing strong.

Apart from construction cost, the overall energy requirement on the production of raw materials like cement, steel and glass was also a serious concern for Baker. He commented once: "I have never doubted that in a country like ours any of us has any right to squander or waste, or use unnecessarily money, materials or energy."

He followed Gandhi's idea that building materials available within five miles of a construction site should be used. It gave Baker innovative ideas to the extent that no two designs of Baker are similar.

Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram built by Baker in 1971 is a masterpiece. Other such remarkable buildings are Chapel for Sacred Heart Centre, Chitralkha Studio Complex, Tourist Centre, India Coffee House, Children's Village, among many others. He hardly cut any tree or levelled the site to construct any building.

Baker co-founded Centre for Science & Technology for Rural Development (COSTFORD) in 1985, a non-profit organisation for propagating low-cost housing particularly mass housing for the poor. He wrote many 'Do it Yourself' booklets for construction. He was a consultant on the housing related panels of various state and the Central governments besides HUDCO and the Planning Commission.

He was granted Indian citizenship in 1990 and was honoured with the Padmashree the same year. He was honoured with the UNO Habitat Award (1992) and World Habitat Award (1993). He was conferred with honorary Doctorate by the University of Central England (1995) and University of Kerala (2003).

Baker was active even at 90 as he worked on a restoration plan for Alappuzha and a sanitation system for the Sabarimala temple.

Though his designs became his signature style, he was opposed to develop his style as a brand. His mission is reflected in his statement: "My feeling as an architect is that you are not after all trying to put up a monument that will be remembered as a Laurie Baker Building but Mohan Singh's house where he can live with his family."

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**Appropriate Architectural Practice**