

THE BUSINESS STANDARD, BOMBAY, 07 APR 2007

Laurie Baker`s art of living spaces

Tripta Batra

He may no longer be with us, but Lawrence Wilfred Baker continues to live through all the living and working spaces he has created over so many years.

Not a single person among all those who met him in the past 62 years of his life in India or spent a day in one of the homes designed and built by him, could describe or talk about Laurie Baker as merely an architect.

Perhaps because the 90-year-old man who died on April 1, 2007 in Kerala, demonstrated over and over again that low-cost, happy living spaces — read housing — are an achievable possibility for millions of poor families in the country if the people in power had the courage to take the right decisions.

“The most immediate feeling I get (two days after Baker’s death), is that he is still here, with us. It’s his truthfulness, his straightforwardness and the joy with which he lived that gives one courage and conviction on how to live life,” says R D Padmakumar, an architect with HUDCO. When Padmakumar worked with the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development (COSTFORD) in Kerala between 1986 and 1989, meeting and learning with Baker was a regular process. Later, when Padmakumar moved to Delhi — and set up a COSTFORD office in the city — he would meet Baker during his annual holiday in Kerala.

Baker’s professional engagement with the task of designing and building was an expression of his philosophy of life. “I learn my architecture by watching what ordinary people do...They don’t even employ builders, the families do it themselves,” said Baker in an interview with Delhi-based architect Gautam Bhatia in 1986.

“My feeling as an architect is that you’re not after all trying to put up a monument which will be remembered as a ‘Laurie Baker building’ but Mohan Singh’s house where he can live happily with his family.”

As a student, this “man without borders” — as Padmakumar describes Baker — attended the Birmingham School of Architecture in the 1930s. During World War II he enlisted with the Friends Ambulance Unit and cared for the wounded in Europe, China and Burma. In 1944, when he was journeying back to England and waiting for a ship in Bombay, Baker happened to meet Mahatma Gandhi.

In the book titled Laurie Baker: Life, Works & Writings by Gautam Bhatia, Baker says he was thrilled to talk to Gandhi about the lives of people in India and China. Of his journey-enforced stay, he writes, “I saw mansions and I saw slums. I met very great people and I mixed with very poor people.” When he talked about his urge to return to work in India, “Gandhiji” encouraged him.

In 1945 Baker was back in India — for the rest of his life, as it turned out — to work as an architect in Faizabad (United Provinces) with a mission that cared for people suffering from leprosy. Horrified at being labelled a “sahib” asked to stay in a large bungalow with many servants and follow a rigid code of conduct, Baker broke out.

He bought a bicycle (the code expected him to ride a horse!) and rode off to stay with an Indian doctor at the leprosy hospital seven miles away. This “wonderful” doctor was P J Chandy, who had an “equally wonderful doctor sister”: Elizabeth Jacob. In 1948, Laurie and Elizabeth married and chose to live in a remote area in Pithoragarh.

In the hills of Pithoragarh for about 15 years and for a few years in hilly Vagamon in Kerala, Elizabeth and Laurie ran clinics and hospitals, and built schools, dispensaries and hospitals for the poor. And during all these years, Baker absorbed and gathered and put to living use, the approach of generations of local communities in building homes.

Baker wasn't ever the typical architect. For each building that he made, he was actively involved at every stage of the work. The use of locally available material, the wisdom of traditionally designed roofs for protection from the rain and the heat (or snow), trellises or lattices, arches, built-in seating, free spaces, the absence of straight-jacketed lines, a flowing connect with the natural environment, and meticulous care at every stage of the process of building and its cost are among the most important features of Baker's architectural expression.

After the Bakers moved to Thiruvananthapuram in the latter half of the 1960s, Baker's singular contribution to architecture grew steadily. His first home there was built at a cost of Rs 2,000.

In the 1970s, one of the homes Baker made was a six-bedroom house for a teacher who had a large family and a meagre income; the cost — Rs 10,000. In Kerala alone, over the decades, Baker was involved in building over 2,000 houses, many institutions, and a fishing village. And nationally, the reach of his design integrity would be difficult to estimate.

While Gandhi's philosophy and the ideals of the Quakers influenced him deeply, Baker's life, and his sense of humour, reflected his very own person and learning. To him, domestic architecture in the hills was delightful and dignified housing that “demonstrated hundreds of years of building research” on how to cope with local materials and local climate.

Those who live in houses designed and built by Baker are well aware of the care and life he put into them. In 1989, when I was fortunate enough to live for five days in the Bakers' earlier home in Vagamon, Kerala, it was not difficult to feel a sense of harmony inside it. The spaces within and outside the largely door-free home, the air-flow, the natural light, gentle curves and the absence of sharp edges form a clear memory.

With us or not, the spirit of Lawrence Wilfred Baker lives in each of the living and working spaces he has created.

<http://www.business-standard.com/lifeleisure/storypage.php?tab=r&autono=280282&subLeft=5&leftnm=5>

Business Standard Ltd. Copyright & Disclaimer

Appropriate Architectural Practice