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Making spaces humane

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For Laurie Baker, architecture was neither an object of art, nor a statement of power; it was something that reached out to people.

PHOTO COURTESY: COSTFORD, THRISSUR



Useful creation: Houses designed by Baker as a part of a slum improvement programme in Chengalchoola, Thiruvananthapuram.

After the lecture was over, two of my students walked up to Laurie Baker and asked if they could share a note with him. He smiled and agreed. On the front side of the note was a question. They asked him what would the son of a lorry driver choose to become if he wanted to shift jobs. Still smiling, he asked them to go ahead with the answer and they turned the note. On the other side, it read that he would become a baker because that is one way he could become a Laurie Baker. He stretched his smile and asked them if he could keep the note. The surprised students agreed and left the note with him. More than the sense of humour, it was the immediacy and directness of the moment that appealed to him. This was not difficult to guess given his nature — simple and direct. Both his self and his buildings emoted and quickly reached the people who inhabited.

Profound influence

Baker was a trained architect from Birmingham. During World War II he joined an ambulance unit and served in China for three years till his health deteriorated. On his way back to England, he had to stay in Bombay since his ship was delayed. His stay took a definitive turn after his chance meeting with Gandhi. Gandhi's concern about Indian social condition and its future appealed to him. After recuperating in London, he returned to India to work in leprosy rehabilitation missions

in Pithoragarh and other places. In 1970, he moved to Kerala, where his wife hailed from. He was conferred Indian citizenship in 1989. After about 50 years of practice, Laurie Baker died on April 1, 2007.

Amongst the many who engage with architecture as an art object or use it to make a statement of power, Baker conveys that architecture is an essential object. He reaches this point directly by making the owners of buildings inhabit, use and find how it qualitatively improves their lives. There is a certain demystification of design in the manner in which he goes about the building. His language is simple and the drawings carry just the essential details. Like the master craftsmen of the yesteryears, he used to move hurriedly from the drawings to the site, worked with it and allowed the buildings to emerge. To the legally obsessed contemporary practice, this must be a fairy tale from the past. Baker could achieve all this because he was able to strike a trustworthy relationship with his clients and kept reinforcing the need for it in the many interviews he gave.

Typical appearance

To talk about the leitmotif of Baker's architecture may be contradictory and might even displease him. But they did have a trademark appearance. They were usually about un-plastered brickwork that were well pointed, filler slab roof, which carries concrete and reinforcement only where it is necessary, abundant light and a comfortable scale. They were cost effective, environment-friendly and affordable. He never contrived his building to make aesthetic statements but they invariably produced a likeable appearance. They were made sumptuous by the materials displayed. None of the ideas was copyrighted and instead he kept saying that he never invented anything new.

Both his buildings and the manner in which he worked captivated students and all those who came to train under him directly or at the COSTFORD office, Thrissur, of which he was part. Two of my students who were training at the Thrissur office used to meet him often and they quickly got into the habit of calling him Daddy, as did everyone else who knew him. In their conversations and mails, there were plenty of references to Daddy, his fun self and the simple but impressive work. I too decided to meet Daddy, observe the geniality at close quarters and ask him about his trick of building lasting relationships with students and clients alike. For some reason, after travelling as far as Thrissur, the meeting got cancelled. Not losing heart, I changed trains and tried to make up by visiting his fishermen's housing project at Kollam.

On the sandy beach, the fishermen's housing was relatively dense and certainly not laid in the monotonous gridiron pattern that one often sees in housing projects. The houses were small with slit windows and had taken the open space around and its use into consideration. Some houses were still under construction. The foundation was shallow and was made of bamboo reinforcement. Sitting at the site I browsed through the booklet I had picked up on the way. It was one of Baker's many do-it-yourself kind of writings. The book and things he visualised expressed concern, care and economy. Back in Chennai, a friend of mine got cynical and asked whether we needed an Englishman to always tell us what was appropriate. For a moment, I thought how Baker would respond to this. May be he would have given his usual smile and gone about working. It is just that categories of identity or the issue of location never bothered him. A 5,000 square feet, low-cost house might sound oxymoronic and he never missed the irony in it. He worked beyond categories and did not believe that his architecture was only for the poor alone nor that it was an alternative or a marginal practice. To him architecture has to work with land, people and environment.

Useful designs

Baker won many national awards including the Padmashree but no international prizes. The closest he came to was being nominated for the Pritzker Prize, the Nobel equivalent for architecture. So far only one international magazine has covered his works. The International Union of Architects gave him an award for contributing to the development of human settlements but did not confer the

gold medal for architectural practice. Many mainstream architects do not recognise this social brand of architecture to be amounting to a creative expression. Like Hasan Fathy, the Egyptian architect who creatively used traditional techniques and built for the poor, he is viewed as a craftsman but not a designer. In an era when architecture is measured by its bigness or novelty, Baker and Fathy would be considered as builders and not architects. But to both, their cherished and rewarding moments would have been to see their users discover the usefulness of their creation. This they had in plenty.

<http://www.hindu.com/mag/2007/04/15/stories/2007041500100400.htm>

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Appropriate Architectural Practice