



TWN FEATURES

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SOLUTIONS TO INDIAN HOUSING CRISIS LIES IN MUD?

Mud may hold the key to tackling the national housing crisis. Drop the idea that building with mud is only for the rural poor, says ingenious architect Lawrie Baker.

TWN Features.

Mud may hold the key to tackling the national housing crisis. India can only hope to give all her citizens a roof over their heads if mud architecture is given its rightful place, says Lawrie Baker, the architect whose unique ideas have drawn warm appreciation from near and far.

"Drop the idea that it (building with mud) is only for the rural poor," exhorts Baker. He recently came out with another low-cost book — in very simple language — explaining how to build fascinating homes with ordinary mud.

If properly and neatly designed, and expertly finished, the resulting house can have five-star looks, says he.

Adds Baker: "My sincerest hope is that every one, rich or poor, will come to understand and accept the fact that mud is a reasonable, acceptable, strong, durable, basic building material that stood the test of hundreds, if not even thousand of years."

Septuagenarian Baker was born and trained in architecture in Birmingham. Later he worked with a medical team in China during World War II.

On his way home, while having to spend three months waiting for a boat at Bombay, he got influenced by the ideals of Gandhi. He returned to India. Here, he worked in a U.P. hill-village and in Kerala, designing and constructing his unique structures.

He served HUDCO and on the Planning Commission's housing working group and several national and state committees.

Some of Baker's designs for single-two-and three-storey mud houses built through the different methods look extremely aesthetic.

This runs in the face of the stereotypes stuck in our minds about what mud houses must look like. "Don't say 'Mud is old fashioned/' he cautions.

"Mud houses need not be entirely made of mud, though this is possible.

For a tiny house (25 square metres) on a 250 sq.m plot, one could get all the mud one needs by digging all over the plot except the basement area just ten inches deep.

Baker looks at the different types of soil — gravel, sand, silt, clay, organic soil and mixture — and the way these can be used for building.

'Soil testing' done in a very simple manner, even with one's bare hands, shows the suitability of the mud for a house. Such unskilled 'tests' have been used in many districts of the country and mud homes are standing there even after seventy to eighty years.

Mud can go into making houses in the cob system (large lumps thrown into place accurately), pise method (earth rammed between two parallel planks), adobe method (using sun-dried bricks), and using low-cost hand-operated compressing machines.

"Wattle and daub' is another method where mud is used as a plaster to cover thin panels of cane or split bamboo.

Baker's inexpensively-priced bilingual Hindi English book called simply 'MUD' gives practical tips on curing mud blocks, termite-protection, and how to safeguard from the biggest enemy of mud walls — water and dampness. Yet well built mud houses can stand proud even in heavy-rainfall areas like Kerala or Assam, says he.

So why have we stopped using mud? Baker raises this question, and proceeds to answer it himself. Many rural families and poorer persons still build with mud. But official or government housing schemes rarely use it. Neither does the growing middle class.

Reasons for this are many: People now do not believe in making or doing things themselves. More people simply don't acquire simple rural skills these days. We are simply more class-conscious now.

So, mud is connected with poverty, cowsheds, pigsties, rural schemes and tribals only.

We end up with options like reinforced concrete, cement blocks and the like. These consume enormous amounts of energy to manufacture. There is not enough cement to go round, and large quantities have to be imported from places like Korea, Baker notes.

On the other hand, lime (which can be used in mud houses as a 'stabilizer') is made from the same basic material as cement, is thousands of years old, and can be manufactured anywhere at a fraction of the energy used and costs as cement.

lime comes from shells and limestone from shells burnt in a mud kiln.

'Portland Cement'⁹ was only invented in this century. But mud and its 'stabilizers' have gone into building houses over the centuries, with our forefathers learning through trial and error.

Building with mud does raise some problems. like, finding the right person to build, and perhaps even getting permissions to build in mud in big urban centres.

But if people laugh away the plan saying cities have no mud, they have to be reminded that neither do cities have cement or steel. If they can bring in the latter, they can bring in mud too, reasons Lawrie Baker.

But the last-word belongs to Baker. The last page of his books just says: "My name is mud anyway! —Lawrie Baker". It may seem as if this joke is on the famed architect himself. But it really could be on those who don't take his words with the seriousness they deserve.

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