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## An Architect of Localisation

*Joginder Singh outlines the facets of the work of Laurie Baker, an architect who settled down in Kerala, and identified himself with the locals through his work – building homes for people.*

*There is many a lesson to be learnt from Laurie Baker, not only for the architect and the mason, the student and the researcher, the ordinary citizen and the intellectual activist, but for all those who are committed to a value-based involvement in the political, cultural, economic, social, and ecological systems of life.*

*Laurie Baker himself may only look at these conceptions and critiques in guileless wonder.*

*If one asked Laurie Baker whether his work was a statement of his politics, he would look at you quizzically – neither in disbelief, nor with cynicism, but in just plain wonder. Is not everything political? Is life that is worth living, lived to the full, away from politics?*

*Laurie Baker of course does not say – nor does he imply – these things. He does not dabble in the ponderous rhetoric of 'appropriate technology', 'low-cost housing', or 'architecture for the people'. This is what we read into him and his work. He simply goes about doing his work. Why? It is his passion, being in the company of people – his 'clients' who do not see in his passion anything other than simple common sense that appeals to them, makes them comfortable in the homes that he has built and at the work places that he has created.*



## **Architecture for the People**

*Joginder Singh Interviews Laurie Baker*

**After five decades of a very active and varied architectural practice, what has the term architecture come to mean for you?**

Broadly speaking, it's just the design of buildings and what they look like - different buildings and of course different designs for different functions. The thing that has meant the most to me, living in India for the past fifty years, is that the architecture reflects the lives of the people who live in the buildings they build and the materials with which they build - materials which are underneath them and around them, the way they deal with the climate and so on. In a country the size of India, every 100 km or even less very often, the architecture has changed, so it tells you a lot about the people, it tells you a lot about the climate and it tells you a lot about the materials available and how man has made them usable for his own purposes.

The (modern) buildings I see and the few buildings I go into, to me they have nothing to do with the normal life of the Kerala individual or with the climate or with the materials available and they are a big curse in many ways. For one, they take absolutely no interest in protecting the people who are using them from our climatic conditions - they are bad for rain, they are very bad for the heat and then, in turn, that means introducing all those 'modern' devices like air-conditioning and big glass windows. The one contradicts the other - the big glass window lets in more heat as well as the light it does, but the heat is more. And then, of course, they have to have their curtains and air-conditioners and all the very expensive things, and use a continual amount of public energy, which isn't getting to the ordinary millions of people at all - so to me it's just bad! I don't see anything particularly beautiful about it. Sometimes they are quite interesting as patterns of squares and big holes but they don't convey anything to me in the way that the local architecture does, even the recent local architecture that still uses local materials and deals with local conditions.

**You have been known for the incorporation of local craft and tradition in your buildings. Do you feel that modern architecture has anything to do with art and craft? Traditional crafts in the country have almost died - how can architecture be used as a medium to revive them?**

Depends on what people mean when they use the word 'craft' - I imagine the dictionary probably explains it as the things that people make. Well, for one thing immediately, in modern architecture, hardly anything is done by local people, except those hired by the contractors and so on. They do not use local materials and they are wasting an enormous amount of the country's energy and therefore money. The economy of the country is very poor at the moment, and all because you have your fans on all the time, you have your lights on all the time, you have your air-conditioners on all the time, you import things like oil from the Gulf countries to burn limestone into cement. To me, for a country that is still struggling to cope with millions of homeless people and with slums and villages that don't have electricity and water, it seems silly to go on from the traditional to the modern, which is almost wholesale imported and not a good thing when it gets here.

As an example, I'm told that in Ernakulam there are a lot of these new modern flats, six to ten storeys high - 'modern' to look at. But I was told that more than half of them had been full but are now empty. For the reasons that I have mentioned already, people get tired of living up at the top and having to walk all the way up and down the stairs because the electricity isn't there, the power isn't there, the water can be a problem, and all that sort of thing. So to me, gradually, we will be taught a lesson and have no option but to learn from what we see.

**Whatever individual houses you have done, you've always managed to strike a very personal rapport with your clients. Would you comment on your approach to designing residences?**

My clients are very often families, or in the case of schools or hospitals, it's the people in charge or those who have caused it to happen. I prefer to go to the client to see how he performs, he or she, how they live, what they do, what they want, what sort of a family or an organisation it is. And then I want to see the site that they have, why did they have it, do they really think it is worth having or doing, or what a lovely site - don't spoil it, what do you want to do with it and so on.

I think the client comes to me because he has similar feelings and they know that no two buildings I have built have ever been the same and everybody gets the building that they want or hope for. It doesn't always work out. It's mostly getting to know them and asking about their family life and what they'll do when the children grow up and things like that, and very quickly

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they either have to throw me out for being too inquisitive or become friends. And many of our friends are people that I have built for 30-50 years ago. One of the most satisfying things from my point of view is that 99.9 per cent of the people I build for remain our friends over these many years.

**You have always worked as a one-man army - designing, building, supervising, almost like the earlier traditions of a master builder. In the initial years of your architectural practice you did take on apprentices but later refrained from doing that. Did you feel that your architecture was getting diluted in some way?**

There is that, that dilution. One or two people were with me for a time and then went off on their own. They did get the ideas or some of the ideas and it is inevitable that one or two or three have made use of the name, which was beginning to get known because of the bigger projects. They have done many of the things that I don't like - putting bits of fancy chajjas (sunshades) or plaster all over the thing and using brickwork only as a decorative feature somewhere, things like that. I feel a bit peeved sometimes, but anyway there are people who want that.

I still think that the main thing that is not taught and is still missing is the personal rapport that must be developed between the client and the architect so that the client will get what he wants. And also there is the other side to it: if you come across a client, I mean one who wants everything that you don't believe in, then you can say that, really, you've come to the wrong person and I don't want to do it.

When you see all the old buildings, usually most of this that I am aiming at, as though it's something new, is already there. In the Himalayas where there is very little 'technology' available, they build together as a family. There will be one long building but every now and then there will be a personal touch.

I don't know whether you can say what is the Laurie Baker legacy. As I have already said, there is a revolt against everybody being in an identical flat ten storeys high, for very many reasons. So it is a very good thing that the revolt has come now. The thing is, will the people who build high storeys do anything about it? ▶