

The Cost of Living: Laurie Baker, architect



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After studying architecture in Birmingham, Laurie Baker served as an ambulance driver in the Second War in Burma and China. On his way back through Bombay in 1945, he met Mahatma Gandhi who implied in their conversation that there was much more useful work to be done by architects in rural India. Shortly afterwards, Baker went back to Uttar Pradesh in northern India where he lived and worked for the next 13 years, married a local doctor, and using indigenous methods and materials, helped to build for the poor and the lepers in the area.

In 1963, he moved to Kerala, a progressive communist state in the south, which has now achieved one hundred percent literacy and a good healthcare system. Baker has lived there ever since building leprosy centers, clinics, civic buildings, village schools, chapels and private houses. In the center of Trivandrum, adjacent to the central station, is a red spiral tower called the 'Indian Tea House'. Ask anybody, who designed it, and they will tell you Laurie Baker. He has also prepared a strategy for the regeneration of Alleppey, known as the 'Venice of the East'.

Not a traditionalist, Baker does not reject modernism and technology but uses it sensibly and sparingly, often working on the site himself to help build economic and affordable buildings which work with, rather than against, local skills, materials, culture and climate. He has practiced and preached a frugal lifestyle, has been a prolific pamphleteer, educator and committed advocate of social housing constantly refreshing the local tradition of construction to reduce cost, to provide service and to minimise waste.

In one of the exhibition rooms, there is a chart written in his own hand listing the many things of wisdom he discovered through his extremely productive working life as an architect and a humanist:

- Only accept a reasonable brief
- Discourage extravagance and snobbery
- Always study your site and see potential relating to the soil, drainage, power, fuel etc.
- You yourself get accurate site details and in-situ facts
- Every building should be unique; no two families are alike, so why should their habitation be alike?
- Study and know local materials, cost, building techniques and construction
- Study the energy used in the production of materials and transport
- Don't rob national resources; don't use them extravagantly or unnecessarily
- Be honest in design, materials, construction, costs and your own mistakes
- Avoid opulence and showing-off by using currently fashionable gimmicks
- Get your conscience out of deep-freeze, and use it
- Look closely at your prejudices and question them
- Have faith in your convictions and have the courage to stick to them

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- Make 'low-costery' a habit and a way of life
- Keep your knowledge up-to-date
- Don't do what is not necessary
- Above all, use common sense
- Trim your staff, drawings and equipment

There is much to learn from what Laurie Baker has preached, practiced and built for those concerned with the everyday problems of homelessness and the living environment in the Third World.

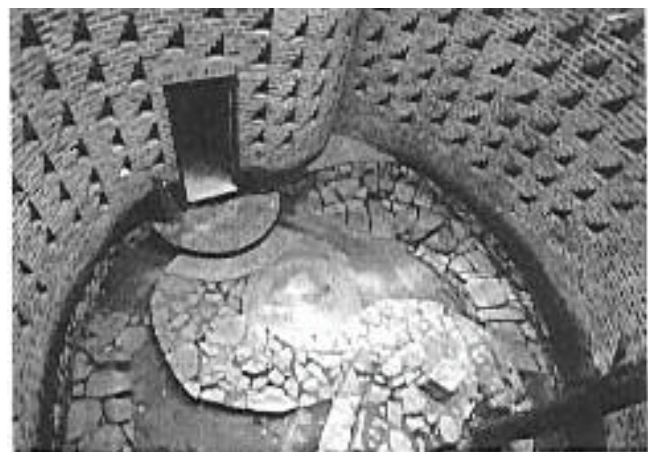


Baker's own house – Trivandrum
A relaxed mix of local, arts and crafts and modern

Above: Dolas House, Kerala

Right: Centre for Development Studies,
Trivandrum – recycled materials and cooling
screen walls

All photographs - Shinkenchiku-Sha



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