

Architecture for the people

Laurie Baker talks to Joginder Singh about his ideas and concerns.

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.

Does contemporary Indian architecture have an identity?

Yes, I think it has a *foreign* identity! The 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, what is it, 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. But at the moment we as a community of professional architects and engineers don't seem to be taking any notice of what the actual needs of the people in the country are. We only seem to be catering to a particular stratum, a so-called upper stratum of the society.

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 organization 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.

Of course now people only come to me, the people who know the sort of thing I do and the principles I have, very often, thanks to magazines like this, I don't have to explain myself. I have done the odd 'modern' building where it seems to fit in. 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 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.

Your residences have always been customized for the client. The religious buildings, namely the churches, you have done have been quite different in shape from the traditional rectangular ones. Also, there has always been a very conscious use of light to lend character to the space. Please comment on how your design approach has varied for the 'Indian' church building.

There is a need for an atmosphere to be given where you can be quiet and absorbed and let your religious thoughts free and so on, which to me imply being at the centre of

things. Then there is light, which is always a good symbol... you know you suddenly think of something, some way out of a problem or some way of overcoming a difficulty and the natural expression is 'suddenly there was light'. I think light is one of the commonest, probably not deliberately so, symbols of all religions. Also, I've always been fascinated by the stained glass windows in the old churches particularly in England and Europe. I've always felt that in the traditional long narrow cruciform shape or cross-shaped plan of the church, people at the back have difficulty in seeing what is going on at the front in the altar or the functions that take place during the church performance or service and the round ones or fan shaped ones are much more effective - many more people can, as it were, take part in and feel that they are part of what is going on. The circle or the round space is so much better from my point of view. I find the circle much more interesting a shape for anything, whether it is religious or play or sport or teaching or wherever people in a crowd need to be organized so that they can focus on one particular spot.

You have always worked as a one-man army - designing, building, and 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. And then Costford (*the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development, a non-profit making voluntary organization that is working extensively in Kerala and in other parts of the country to propagate the ideologies of Laurie Baker*) developed and the training no longer needed to be personal.

In the end, what would you say is the Laurie Baker legacy? What is the message you would like to give to the coming generation of technology-affected and 'computer savvy' architects?

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. A lot depends on what people who claim to be disciples, whether they really believe it or not or whether they are waiting till the old boy is gone and they'll do what they want. There are many who wouldn't do it and some who have done it but as long as the general idea is passed on that there must be this rapport between the architect, the designer, the client's family and the climate, the surroundings and all that sort of thing. 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?