

'No architect will have a following like Baker'

When landscapes the world over have begun to look the same, visionaries like the late Laurie Baker insisted on giving the unmistakable local touch. Architect Benny Kuriakose recalls those warm moments he had spent with the Gandhian master builder, in a conversation with **RANJANI GOVIND**

I am exactly a mould of Laurie Baker. Whatever the improvisations and added features I try to bring into my projects, I am wedded to the cast, shape and blueprint that my first coach patterned me into. So says Benny Kuriakose, while reminiscing the legendary 'low-cost hero' of architecture who died recently in Kerala. "The British-born architect, Baker, a boon to the architectural world, was a professional of high standards who chose to cling to the Indian soil after the words of Gandhiji struck a chord in him to work for the downtrodden and bring dignity to their lives," recalls Benny Kuriakose.

Baker had built scores of homes, schools, hospitals, government buildings and churches. "The best characteristic of Baker was he practised what he preached, just as the Mahatma, and never saw any discrimination while working for a mansion or a middle income home," says Benny, who worked closely under him in the mid 1980s.

Benny Kuriakose later received the Charles Wallace India Trust Award that took him to the University of York, U.K., for an M.A. in Conservation Studies. Even as top actors of the glitzy world got their dwellings shaped by his deft ethnic designery back in India, Benny's sense of duty and commitment to the country's economically poor was seen when he was asked by the *Malayalam Manorama* to design the rebuilding of Banegaon vil-

lage after the Latur earthquake.

Benny's conservation projects and reports on Srirangapatna buildings and the Aneundi Palace of Karnataka were other highlights of his career just as his study on the Senate House in Madras University, or his design of Kerala's Institute of Palliative Medicine and the Backwater Ripples Resort came in for a lot of appreciation. An INTACH projects consultant, Benny also brought in a pastoral character to buildings. His association with the Madras Crafts Foundation saw him transplant a hamlet of conventional dwellings into 'Dakshinachitra', a creation of ethnic splendour along the sea coast of Chennai. He also advises State Governments on the feasibility of bringing in values in low-cost construction techniques for large projects with budget restrictions.

PropertyPlus spoke to this ardent student of Baker who carries loads of memories of his guru and retains a stamp of him while fashioning his buildings.

Your association with Baker...

I was about to finish my college and was doing some fieldwork as part of my thesis. I had a chance meeting with him during one of my trips when he was working in a site explaining some nitty-gritty to masons there. I walked up to him, introduced myself and asked him if I could learn from him. I knew that he did not have an office and that he carried out his work at the site only. He told me



Architect Benny Kuriakose

that he may not be able to spend much time or pay me well either. Since I was interested in learning I joined him immediately. I never drafted anything never designed anything... just observed the professional's touch in every matter. Most of his ideas sprang at the site itself and he never had any inhibitions about voicing his frank opinion or explaining complex things in a simple way. It was a great work experience of basics...a lool

at architecture in a different way. I owe most of my achievements in architecture today to the grand old master of design.

So your buildings speak of Baker theories?

There are two phases in my architectural career. In the first phase I did buildings strictly according to Baker's style of exposed brickwork, filler slab etc. If somebody wanted me to do a non-Baker style building, I refused. I never used any contractors but had my own team of trained craftsmen to do the buildings using various cost effective methods. When I started on my own, there were very few people who were doing the so-called 'low-cost buildings'. The picture was quite different in 1992 when many organisations, architects and engineers started doing buildings in Baker style. That is when I felt we have to take the movement further. I started using recycled materials, natural materials such as stone, got more into a regional style using timber roofs and brought traditional crafts too. I also wanted a change from the exposed brickwork construction.

Baker's building principles...

It is appropriate to call Baker's brick and mortar expressions as 'no-waste houses' than 'low-cost houses'. His main principle was "if it is not necessary, then don't use it". He wanted to change the popular feeling that low cost means low

quality. His concept of low cost houses was not by reducing quality. He could design a 3000 sq. ft. manor in his inimitable high-end designs with abundant nature in and around, or a 300 sq. ft. house with innovative thinking to help suit those who did not have enough resources too. He designed houses only after studying each one's requirements.

Baker's Gandhian ideals...

Truthfulness and sincerity. He practised what he said. He used materials which were locally available. There were no toilets behind a glass façade in his buildings. A church looked like a church and a school looked like a school, a kind of straight forward designing.

Did he give importance to nature or the low cost building materials? His buildings merged with the landscape. His principle was "we should plant before we plan". When I queried about his myriad designs that assume a naturalistic shape, each so strikingly different, he would say, "look at the available tree cover in a site first and then visualise your building to retain all the green, your designs will naturally be varied and at once ethnic." And with sloped land, he constructed at different levels to restrict earth-work to the minimum and also saw a natural emerging beauty in gradient and undulation. He used the materials according to availability and cost factor. Where stone was cheaper than bricks, he used stone. Building material

was used only where it was cheap, although Baker's buildings are synonymous with exposed brickwork.

Baker in Indian soil...

When he was waiting for a ship to England, he met Gandhiji. The Mahatma asked him to come back to India and work for the needy here. Baker was inspired by Gandhiji's ideas that a house is best made with materials found within a five-mile radius. Back in India later, Baker worked with leprosy missionaries who wanted to convert existing buildings into small hospitals where funds were always a limitation. Later on he married Elizabeth and settled in India.

Many architects would have been benefited from him?

Baker has influenced a generation of architects, mainly youngsters. There may be architects more well-known in India, but no architect will have a following like Baker. Although many may not be strictly following all of his thoughts, an appreciable number have been greatly influenced by his fundamentals. Baker's architecture was a novelty by itself making use of local materials without much of concrete and steel...although architecture schools even now have exercises with concrete and steel. Very little is taught about earth buildings and timber roofs. People call his houses 'Baker model houses.' No other architect had been able to make such a bold statement in his practice.