



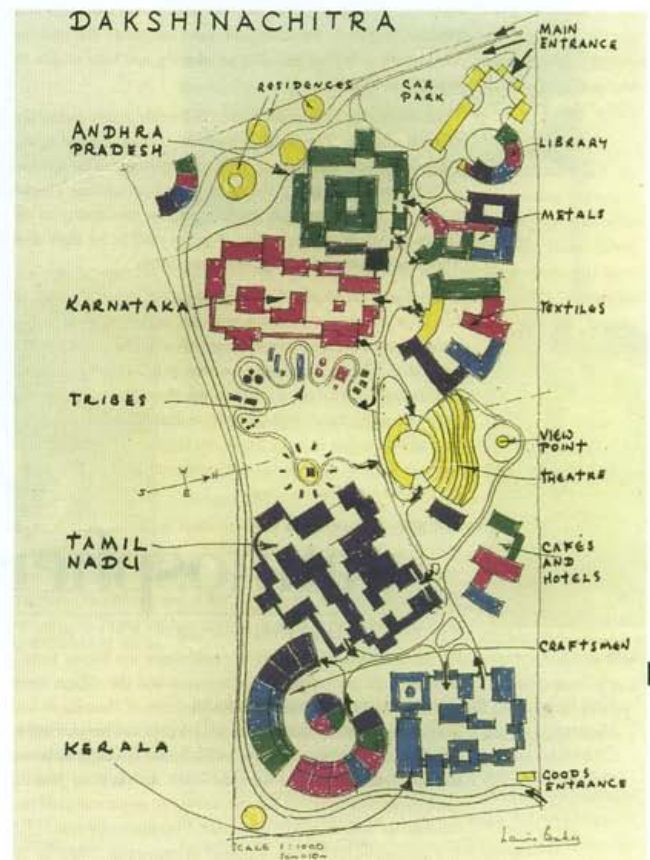
evolving dakshinachitra

Text by Benny Kuriakose

Dakshinachitra (meaning a picture of the south) in Chennai, is a center for the living traditions of art, craft and architecture of India, highlighting the ethnicity of South India. A project of the Madras Craft Foundation (MCF), a non-profit organisation, Dakshinachitra opened to the public in December 1996.

Late Laurie Baker – the renowned architect, provided his services to the foundation. The spatial conceptualisation of Dakshinachitra encompasses his building techniques and methods and reinforces his philosophy of empowering masons and craftspeople in the building process.

Laurie Baker's contribution to architecture in India could be said to be two-fold. One is through the buildings he designed and built himself and that is easily measurable. The other is the influence his philosophy, spirit and personality had on professional architects and on people in other walks of life, who translated his principles of design through their works. Dakshinachitra is an example of his influence in both these strains.



Debbie Thiagarajan, the founder who imbibed Baker's principles of design and evolved them into a contemporary context into what is now Dakshinachitra, had to work hard to persuade Baker to design the site. I believe I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to work at Dakshinachitra, in the path that Baker set and to be able to continue it in a way that is meaningful to people today and hopefully in the future.

The archives at Dakshinachitra have the many instructions Baker gave, in sketches and writings, showing that Baker was finally drawn in. He designed 'Guest House 1' and was in touch by giving detailed notes and instructions through the early phases of the Tamil Nadu section, especially the weaver's house and the Chettiar house.

Although my association with Baker and Debbie started in 1984, with Madras Craft Foundation, I became involved with the buildings in Dakshinachitra only in the second half of 1995, with the construction of the three houses in the Kerala section, Calicut house, Puthupally house and Koothattukulam house. Later on, were designed the main reception centre, the stores, the gallery, the restaurant, guesthouses 2 and 3, and the other minor public buildings.

Baker's Initial Concepts for Dakshinachitra

Baker began his master plan for Dakshinachitra as a map, which in execution was set slightly differently. One could say that his ideas were usually unconventional. He visualised each state as a village with its small streets and walkways. Baker did not want to have grand buildings in the campus. He thought that 'this place' should

deal with arts and crafts of ordinary people. He pursued his philosophy of "small is beautiful". "The idea is to abandon the big exhibition pavilion system entirely. For one thing, they can't be typical or genuine because our forbears didn't have such things, and for another thing, folk stuff is mainly small. Blow it up and out of size, it is all wrong. These huge hotel foyers with miles of fake plaster with little mirrors stuck in irks me." Those words came back strongly to me, while designing the main reception centre.

Baker had in mind a bold entrance for each state. Here is a humorous way in which he describes his idea. "I think it is wise to make a prominent and good, attractive entrance and a comparatively unobtrusive exit because if 'in' and 'out' are together on the road façade, there will always be half of the population who will go in thro' the 'out' and the other half who will go in thro' the 'in', but after five minutes will say- let's get the hell out of here - turn round and go back thro' the 'in'." This idea was executed in the Kerala and Karnataka sections, which got an entrance each.

His idea on movement and circulation of people within the complex is best described in his own words: "I dislike the 'one way only' exhibitions- you come especially to see one thing and you have to trail miles round everything else." The implementation of his concept is what makes Dakshinachitra different from other museums. While discussing the textile hall building attached to the weaver's house, here is Baker's hilarious comment. "At all Indian exhibitions on textiles, pottery, brassware, fertilizers or food festivals, I pay, go in, and then have to be pushed right through the whole thing like a pig going in at one end of a factory and coming out



1. Activity center at Dakshinachitra; 2. Original site plan by Laurie Baker; 3. Open area pathway.



at the other end as a sausage and a scrubbing brush.”

Baker had a different idea on restaurants. He said, “Food can also be like the ‘pavilion’ area, personally I think you should get state food, that is, Tamil specialties in the Tamil section and so on. Again, you not only get food but should get it in the local place and style and way of eating, you also see the preparation and you should have exhibits in the same area— those lovely coconut scrapers, salt containers, etc.” Perhaps it was too early to think of a ‘multiplex’ but it was practical to have an eatery that was a restaurant common to all the four southern states.

Baker did not have fixed ideas. He knew very well that it was impossible to plan everything ahead. “Let the place grow and be seen to be growing.” This is exactly what happened in Dakshinachitra.

One finds that the letters Baker had written to Debbie and the earlier architects were full of practical tips on how to do the construction or how to repair any defects that happened. His advice on setting the foundation in sandy soils is: “Where and when sand is dry and falls in, moisten first and do a small section at a time, that is, do not dig out the entire foundation trenches, then later, build the walls in, dig a bit, build a bit and repeat.”

To the enquiry whether one needed an architect to do the job, Baker’s answer was, “of course you hardly need an architect— better to get village craftspeople to come and build a cottage— then let it out to weavers or metal workers...and then another group can get on with a temple and another cottage.”

When one of the engineers was apprehensive about doing a sloping roof, Baker’s quaint reply was, “...Village carpenters and masons have done it for hundreds of years— but we educated moderns can’t do it.”



1. View of the courtyard; 2. Entrance lobby; 3. Guest house courtyard.



Thiagarajan recalls, "He (Baker) also oversaw the initial construction, helped to solve problems and tried his best to mould me into a lay architect and engineer. Architecture, he said, was mostly common sense, so if I looked carefully at the buildings and tried to understand the materials, I should be able to solve most of my problems. Dakshinachitra has reams of letters from him trying to explain to me how to solve a problem when I wrote or telephoned him."

Changes to the Original Site Plan

The change of circumstances around Dakshinachitra's location called for some alterations to the original site plan. For example, the entrance has changed from the side road to the main highway on which Dakshinachitra is situated and now we have a direct entrance from East Coast Road.

Many of the buildings, which were transplanted, came much later. The size and the style of the buildings, which were purchased, were not detailed in the initial site plan. To accommodate these buildings, changes were made in the site plan.

The decisions for changes in the site plan were taken after much thought and consensus after studying the plan of the building, which was being transplanted. Due consideration was also given to the circulation pattern within this building. The changes were incorporated as and when required and many additional facilities not foreseen at the time of making the site plan were added.

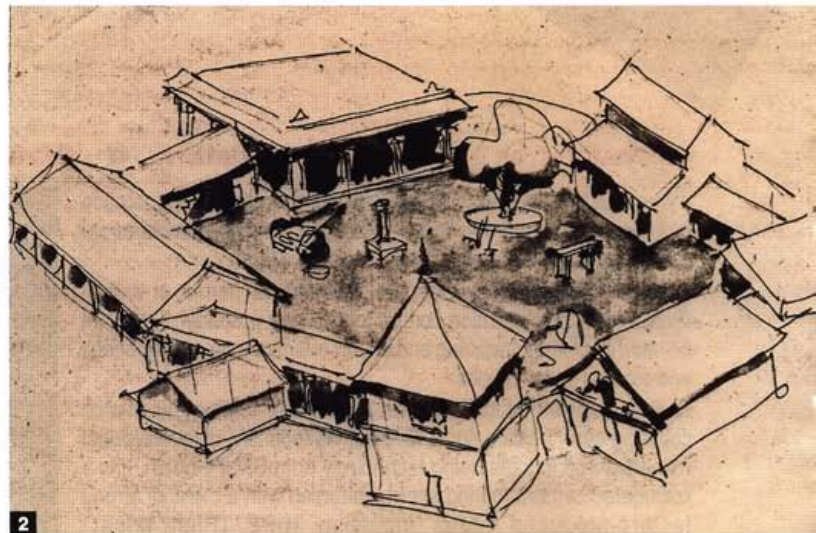
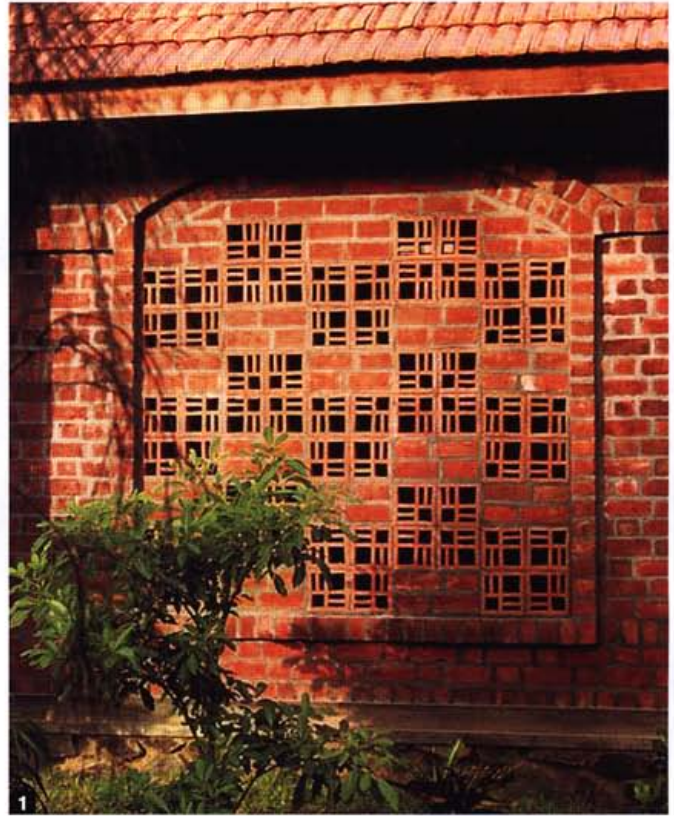
The 'Guest House 1', which was designed by Baker was never used as per the original concept. His design was to assign the verandah, which was on one side, to become part of the public space, where the craftsmen would demonstrate their craft, and alongside, sell their products. The rear side was assigned as the more private area for family members.

My Role in Dakshinachitra

When the Dakshinachitra project came up, not only did I shift my residence from Kerala to Chennai, but unlike other projects I had done in Chennai, it was the cause of my continued stay here. When I came into the picture, the construction of the 'Guest House 1' was over. Since this building had used the various cost effective techniques, it was decided to continue the same vocabulary for all the public buildings in future.

Regarding the main entrance building-cum-reception centre, the brief given was that this should be a contemporary building, but should set an example so that people could understand how the traditional elements could be used in present-day architecture. There was this huge reserve of old stone and timber columns, which had been collected earlier and I used these in the design of the new buildings. The doors as well as the windows had come from buildings in Chennai city, which had been pulled down to pave the way for construction of apartments. I used the numerous elements, such as varying heights of roofs, verandahs, courtyards, low windows and a good overhang, like in many of our traditional buildings, to protect the walls from rain and sun. I kept the scale very low, which is suitable for a museum that is predominantly vernacular and for crafts.

Since the restaurant could not be constructed before the inauguration, it was decided to have a tea shop, which could eventually be replaced by the restaurant. The materials, which were



1. Jaali at the Dakshinachitra complex.
2. Sketch of one of the state pavilions by Laurie Baker.

left over from the other buildings, were used to make the tea shop, which was finished in about two weeks.

Once the project was inaugurated, the construction of the exhibition gallery started. This was originally meant to be the store, then the 'Guest House 2 and 3'. Subsequently, the restaurant and the library were added. Now Laurie Baker's spirit lives on as more buildings such as the potter's kiln, the administrative building and school of traditional design are to come up in the future. +