

National Workshop on
" Sustainable Housing Technologies"
(As Part of Laurie Baker Centenary Celebrations)

National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj
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Key Note Address :

Relevance of Laurie Baker in the context of contemporary human settlements challenges and technology development in India.

By
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1. It is indeed my privilege and also an honour to have been invited to participate and deliver the keynote address at this National Workshop on “Sustainable Housing Technologies” as part of Laurie Baker Centenary Celebrations. I have chosen as my theme **“Relevance of Laurie Baker in the context of contemporary human settlements challenges and technology development in India.”**
2. It is a pleasant coincidence and my humble privilege that I was also the keynote speaker at the launch of the year long countrywide celebrations for the LB centenary year in Trivandrum in March this year. A number of individuals sitting here in this meeting were present there too and I am sure they would remember my emphasizing the need to celebrate LB’s work and persona—yes, not work alone, persona too—not only in India but internationally, as LB’s philosophy, wisdom, work ethics, principles, approach, contribution and architecture are relevant to the entire world seeking alternative ways of thinking and new ways of doing things in the context of contemporary human settlements challenges.
3. I must also remind you of another pleasant coincidence that this workshop takes place in Hyderabad, at the National Institute of **Rural** Development and just three weeks ahead of the United Nations’ Global Conference on Human Settlements taking place in Quito, Equador. This conference is important as it is organized every 20 years and being a UN Conference the entire world takes part in it-- not only the governments, also professionals, civil society, business, academic world and others concerned with settlements development. The first one in 1976 was in Vancouver and the second in Istanbul was in 1996. The third in Quito in 2016 will have more than 200 countries participating. And they too will discuss challenges of urbanization, city development and reaching housing to all in the reasonable time period, at an affordable cost to the consumers, their governments and societies and this earth, as it must be done in a sustainable manner.
4. It is significant to note that Habitat 3, despite its 20 year cycle, is not even touching the challenges of rural settlements though 50 percent of the world’s people and about 70 percent of the developing country population still lives in the villages and the rural settlement challenges, though not as loud and threatening as the urban, are anything but formidable. It is unfortunate that the issues and challenges of rural settlements are pushed under the carpet globally and here in India too. In is in that context of the rural neglect that this workshop on the Sustainable Housing Technologies taking place at NIRD becomes important--- that while discussing LB and housing technologies the rural place will not be forgotten.
5. This event at NIRD at Hyderabad is part of a yearlong countrywide celebration to bring to the people in general and the building professionals in particular not only the architectural creations of a uniquely talented and socially committed architect, Laurie

Baker, but also his vision of the profession, his approach to buildings design, his sensitivity to the Indian people's needs-- especially those of the common people-- and his understanding of the creativity of the craftsmen involved in making buildings and shaping the built environment.

- 6 At the outset I must congratulate NIRD for this initiative because LB's work and vision are relevant to India. The new generation of architects and other professionals in the building business in particular deserve to know more about this man, his philosophy, his wisdom, his work, his approach, his humility and his silent contribution.
- 7 LB was an English man . He chose to go, settle and work in a country which was enslaved by his own government. He moved to India in 1945, just two years before India became independent, as an architect associated with a leprosy mission and continued to live and work in India for over 50 years. His speciality is that he never ever forgot that, coming as he did as part of a leprosy mission, his work was "service" "to the people, especially service to the common people . Not many architects today know or recognise the "service" part of their profession. The business part is their main preoccupation.
- 8 I have little hesitation in saying that the '80s and the '90s generation of architects of Kerala—and, to some extent, India – were singularly fortunate in having a Guru in Mr. Laurie Baker, if I am allowed to use that much abused phrase in a case where it is the most appropriate. In a manner of speaking, Mr. Baker is to the local architecture what Mahatma Gandhi was to India's freedom struggle. Both lead to liberation, both believed in simplicity, both drew their strategies from the culture and tradition of the place, both had a vision of the society they served, and both had implicit faith in the common people and their wisdom. Mr. Baker is a true leader in the field, which has hardly produced a leader of merit. His contribution and inspiration is not in form of technology or style alone. It is in the form of change of mindset, in the philosophy of work, and in the attitude to architectural design, practice and problem solving. He made architecture belong to the place-- to the soil, to culture, to tradition and, most importantly, to the local people. And that is no small contribution in a country where architecture, in the hands of the foreign trained and influenced architects, is losing its roots, and where alienation—alienation from the people, from the roots, tradition, culture, climate, soil and from the local challenges – is the order of the day. And, in a way, it is a paradox, as Mr. Baker was a foreigner.
- 9 Mr. Baker believed in cost reduction, not a fashionable phrase among the modern day architects and building professionals. He gave a new respectability to local materials—especially brick and clay tiles. His architecture merged with the surrounding landscape, rather than standing out. It is not in competition with the nature but in harmony with it. Working with the fellow professionals, he improved and popularized technologies: be that rattrap bond or filler slab, which saved material, reduced cost and created new aesthetics. He challenged conventional engineering design, practice and wisdom by using 9" and 4.5" thick brick walls as load bearing structures for the buildings taller than a single storey. And, most importantly, he gave a new status to the traditional

construction artisans, especially the masons, by working with them in inventing and popularizing alternative construction methods. He professed that the architects could learn from the artisans, the mason and the carpenter--. Something we had not heard or thought before. The most lasting contribution of Mr. Baker is his attitude to architectural design and practice. He sought to simplify and demystify it. He made people---the common people-- relate with it. If you see it this way, you would find my comparison with Mahatma Gandhi not very odd, misplaced or exaggerated.

- 10 LB is known for his initiatives in cost-effective energy-efficient architecture and designs that maximized space, ventilation and light and maintained an uncluttered yet striking aesthetic sensibility. He promoted revival of regional building practices and use of local materials; and combined this with a design philosophy that emphasized a responsible and prudent use of resources and energy. He was a pioneer of sustainable architecture as well as organic architecture, incorporating in his designs, even in the late 1960s, concepts such as rain-water harvesting, minimizing usage of energy-inefficient building materials, minimizing damage to the building site and seamlessly merging with the surroundings. Due to his social and humanitarian efforts to bring architecture and design to the common man, his honest use of materials, his belief in simplicity in design and in life, and his staunch Quaker conviction in non-violence.
- 11 All great architects—Master Architects-- have followers. Each generation produces Masters and a legion of their followers. So has Mr. Laurie Baker, though, I think, he would not like the tag of a 'Master'. His humility, attitude and his brand of professionalism won't make him comfortable with that kind of title. He was too simple and unpretentious for that. His followers, however, are different, unlike the other followers of the 'Great Masters', both foreign and local. They don't imitate style, they imbibe spirit. It is this 'spiritual' following and the following in 'spirit' that makes Mr. Baker's followers command respect and set trends. I won't be surprised if they surpass their Guru in achievements. I get that impression when I talk to Shankar or Chandra Dutta or Sajan or see work of Costford or Habitat Technology Group or others who belong to LB school of design and construction. I have seen Habitat Technology Group's work and contribution in earthquake reconstruction in Gujarat. It has set new standards there. I have worked with Shankar and his team in Dhaka, Bangladesh. They not only constructed a campus designed by my office, they made Bangladesh experience a new technology, which even the likes of Dr. Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, considered relevant for his country. Costford carries on the legacy and vision of LB in what it designs and builds. And the Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies works to keep his legacy alive and mission going. These individuals and organizations are not followers of Mr. Baker, they are his spiritual heirs. They are carriers of a message, not the duplicator of his style. They are more than 'alternative' practice-ners'. They are leading a silent yet most relevant movement.

12 Let me now move from shri Baker's qualities, virtues and persona and turn briefly to the Indian human settlements scene and point out why we need not only to remember LB but learn from him. That too fast and fundamentally. Do not be surprised or get scandalized if I were to suggest that while India's public life and development challenge need Mahatma Gandhi to return, in some form, with his ideas, philosophy and strategies, the complex challenges of managing India's settlements, both rural and urban, needs vision, approach and thought that guided LB's work. We are headed towards a chaotic uncertainty, if not an inevitable crisis, so far shaping the built environment in our cities and villages is concerned and there is much that is relevant in what LB thought, did and showed.

13 As this workshop is on

- (a) Sustainable Housing Technologies
- (b) is taking place in the context of LB's philosophy, work and legacy
- (c) is organized by a national agency with dominant commitment to the rural sector's development needs, and
- (d) must be seen in the context of contemporary human settlements challenges that on one end must recognize
 - (i) the government's ambitious—over ambitious—plans to construct 50 million (30 million rural, 20 million urban) houses by 2022
 - (ii) Staggering infrastructure deficit all over
 - (iii) Resource crunch
 - (iv) Urgent need to save fast deteriorating environment in our cities and villages
 - (v) support people's own housing actions that generate many times more houses, both in the rural and the urban places than the combined effort of all formal sector producers and suppliers in the public and private sector
 - (vi) create employment for those ready—to—enter—the--job-- market from amongst 800 million below the age of 35must be embellished with the following 11 characteristics.

The technology change and development that delivers the following :

- (a) Affordability: Technology that makes housing less expensive and therefore affordable . Affordable to the end user. Affordable to the builder and supplier. Affordable to the government that subsidizes it. And affordable to the earth, its air, land and water that takes the burden of resultant pollution and waste.
- (b) Technology that does not let quality suffer unduly while reducing cost.
- (c) Sustainability: Technology that conserves resources, reduces green house gases and pollution and is gentle to the environment and ecological formations
- (d) Technology that optimizes job creation
- (e) Technology that is relevant to all—urban and rural.
- (f) Technology that enables fast speed response. India adds 30 people to its urban population every minute. More housing is to be created than exits in our cities.
- (g) Technology that affords longer life span to buildings and infrastructure.
- (h) Technology that is disaster resistant

- (i) Technology that demystifies
 - (j) Technology that is people-centric; does not marginalize craftsmen first and people next
 - (k) Technology that recognizes and reaches small, informal and organic
 - (l) Technology that is modern in the context of new digital world.
- 14 LB is not with us now. But he has left behind a body of work , a philosophy, a way of thinking and doing. A unique legacy. Besides being a visionary he also had a strong practical side to him. That practice is of huge inspiration and guide as we work to contribute to managing our rural and urban settlements better and taking architecture to the common people.
- 15 And this centenary celebration is a useful vehicle to reach his voice, vision, philosophy and work to the architects and others in the building profession. Especially to the younger generation. To the students who are learning to become architects and engineers and have dreams in their eyes to contribute to shaping better building, better villages and cities and better life for all people. Laurie Baker has much to inspire them and we should not miss this opportunity. You have made the beginning. Let us take it further.

Thank you for this opportunity to meet you all and remember LB.

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