

## BUILDER, THINKER, VISIONARY

Celebrating the philosophy and practice of Laurie Baker

### SPEAKERS

**Mr. Gopalan Nair  
Shankar**

Founder, Habitat  
Technology Group

**Dr. Pronab Sen**

Country Director- India  
International Growth  
Centre

**Dr. Abhijit Sen**

Retired Professor,  
Jawaharlal Nehru  
University



**Screening of '*Uncommon Sense*'  
& discussion with the director**

**Date: 28th Dec' 2016 ,Wed, 5pm**  
**Venue: Seminar Hall 1& 2**  
**India International Centre**

rsvp: Rohan Jain: 011-26544100, [rjain@devalt.org](mailto:rjain@devalt.org)  
Rambha: 011-26544221, [rtripathy@devalt.org](mailto:rtripathy@devalt.org)

## Builder, Thinker, Visionary

### *Celebrating the Philosophy and Practice of Laurie Baker*

#### About Laurie Baker and His Life in Kerala

Laurie Baker once said, “Our modern, advanced scientific minds should know how to assess the merits and demerits of historical and factual evidence of the way people who have lived in a particular setting and climate, and have coped with the problems which are still inevitably ours today. To brush aside all this demonstration and evidence as old-fashioned and therefore useless is extremely foolish. Having made our assessment, we would show ourselves capable of adopting the lessons we have learned - negative or positive, they are of equal importance - to our current living habits and the currently available building materials at our disposal. Along with this we should remind ourselves that it is not 'advancement', 'development', or 'progress' to indulge in modern building materials and techniques at tremendous expenses and to no good effect when there is no justification or reason for their use, instead of older, simpler, and inexpensive methods.”

Padma Shri Lawrence Wilfred ‘Laurie’ Baker dedicated his life to the service of the ordinary people primarily through his innovative and environmentally-friendly approaches to the design and construction of buildings. A chance meeting with Mahatma Gandhi inspired and introduced him to India. He was conscious of the wastage involved in using energy-intensive materials which are also socially and financially expensive. However, he was not only a designer and builder but also one who had a holistic vision of the need to live in harmony with nature. For him, ‘habitat’ included the physical and social environment to lead a healthy as well as purposeful life.

His tryst with traditional architecture in Kerala began when he moved there with his wife. Many people and institutions had shown great interest in reducing costs of building. It started when all the Bishops had agreed to work together at the Kerala Bishops' conference for the good of the common poor man. They had, with great fanfare, agreed that each parish in the state should try and put up at least one inexpensive, small house and give it to the poorest family, regardless of caste or creed. But after three years only two or three houses had been built. The Archbishop Mar Gregorios of Trivandrum called for a 'post-mortem' seminar to find out the reason for this failure. The explanation given by all was simple enough: There was no longer any such thing as an 'inexpensive building.' Laurie Baker begged to disagree and offered to demonstrate, rather than to talk about ways of building inexpensive houses and spent the following two weeks putting up a small house of about forty square meters and costing, by request, less than Rs 3,000 (about US\$ 400 at the time). The participants of the conference came to see the result of this demonstration and to their amazement declared the house to be 'too good' for 'the poor'. So the Archbishop asked for a second house to be put up for half the cost!

#### More than a ‘Builder’

To label Laurie Baker as just a ‘builder’ would be gravely unjust. His philosophy about living surpassed the four walls he often built and influenced every sphere of life.

He spoke on various matters and often demonstrated his ideals in the shape of a building. He discussed education and creating an 'atmosphere' by which he did not mean air, but the ‘mental, moral, artistic, emotional, and natural environment.’

This is what he wanted an education space to be. By ‘natural environment’ he did not just mean trees and grass, and ornamental water. He talked about what surrounds us, and not just physical, tangible surroundings, but conditions such as war and famine, weather and so on. Next, there was architectural planning. Concerning mental atmosphere, this must

be done with both children and young people, and with those who are to educate them, in mind, all the time. He was oppressed by spending everyday five to six hours enclosed in a large square cube with dark brown and green walls and straight rows of wooden desks, and dingy old charts and blackboards hanging on the walls. These were the thoughts when he planned a school building – his reward was the sight of children enjoying the spaces he had created.

His views on public health led him to build hospitals in some of India's remotest parts. The majority of India's people live in her villages, and when they fall ill, they experience great hardship in procuring the services of a hospital or doctor. They have to cover long distances to reach a hospital. When they arrive, they are bewildered by the strange, new surroundings, and the scores of other patients. Rural hospitals, he said, need to be planned and designed to cope with these difficult conditions peculiar to rural areas, and to come to the aid of the villager, who seeks help to ensure that he does not feel lost, helpless and dazed in an atmosphere which is just likely to induce such feelings. Evidently they have to incorporate certain features, which are not so necessary in a normally accepted city central hospital. In the first place, the buildings of the rural hospital should instill confidence in the village folk: They have to be simple, friendly, attractive, and unforbidding. They have to be built with local materials, with which a village dweller is familiar back home. They will arrive at the outpatient department, a building which has to be open, airy, and spacious. In the cool sheltered area, they should be able to see where the different departments and people they have to contact are situated. If they have to remain in the hospital for treatment, his surroundings have to be clean and cheerful, and not too dissimilar from those of his village.

### Architectural Beliefs

Perhaps his most valued contribution to architecture remains a handwritten piece of paper containing his beliefs. In this, he talks about his accepting only reasonable briefs, discouraging extravagance and snobbery, studying the site, accounting for municipal services, studying local materials and building techniques, making your building unique, understanding energy usage, being honest in material consumption, knowing your own prejudices, making cost-efficiency a way of life, believing that building codes are only advisory and not mandatory, and above all, using common sense.

The context of spiralling housing demand in India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the need to explore alternative building materials leads to the aim of this **trialogue2047** which is seen in the questions below:

1. How relevant are Laurie Baker's philosophy and practices in an increasingly 'modern', 'developing', and urbanising and India?
2. How can his beliefs be brought to the forefront and inspire other critical sectors like healthcare and education? How can we truly celebrate his life?
3. What role can the Indian civil society play in ensuring that Laurie Baker's ideals remain relevant? How can the civil society do justice to what he stood for?

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28<sup>th</sup> December 2016

**Speakers Profile**



**Dr. Abhijit Sen**  
*Retired Professor*  
*Jawaharlal Nehru University*

Prof. Sen holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Cambridge. Prior to joining Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1985, Prof. Sen held teaching posts at the Universities of Sussex, Cambridge, Oxford, and Essex in the UK. He has also served on the Senate or Executive Council of several academic institutions in India, such as the Indian Institute of Technology (Delhi), University of Allahabad, and the University of Delhi. He has also served as Adviser or Consultant to a number of international organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme, New York; the International Labour Organisation, Geneva; the Food and Agriculture Organisation, Rome; the OECD Development Centre, Paris; the UN University World Institute of Development Research, Helsinki; the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rome; the Asian Development Bank, Manila. Prof. Sen was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 2010, the third highest civilian award in India, in recognition of his distinguished service in Public Affairs.



**Mr. G. Shankar**  
*Founder*  
*Habitat Technology Group*

Mr. Gopalan Nair Shankar is the pioneer of a people's housing movement based on cost-effective and sustainable building technologies in India. He completed his architecture studies from the College of Engineering Trivandrum in 1982 and later did his M.S. from the Birmingham School of Architecture and a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism. He has served as a Consultant to various international organisations like Cordaid (Netherlands), Architecture and Development (France), and BGS, Germany. His sensitivity to the needs of the common man, the marginalized, the fisher folk, the slum dwellers, and the tribals earned him the title, "People's Architect". He is the founder and chief architect of Habitat Technology Group, an NGO working in the shelter sector in south Asia with responding centers in India and in other developing countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. Shri Shankar was awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth highest civilian award, in 2011.



**Dr. Pronab Sen**  
*Country Director, India Central Programme*  
*International Growth Centre*

Dr. Pronab Sen holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. He specialized in Open-economy Macroeconomic Systems, International Economics, and Public Finance. He joined the Government of India as Economic Adviser, Department of Electronics (1990-1994), where he was one of the architects of the National Software Policy (1990) and the Software Technology Park Policy (1991). He has served as the Chairman of the National Statistical Commission and was the first Principal Economic Adviser at the Government of India's Planning Commission. He has chaired a number of government Committees, most notably on Ecological Fragility, Control of Prices of Essential Drugs, and Slums. Dr. Sen was the first Chief Statistician of India.