

# Cultural Baggage and the White Man's Burden

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The émigré is an emblematic yet under-investigated figure in the intersecting trajectories of modernity and tradition. Like the expatriate expert, the foreign-trained local, and, more recently, the global consultant, the émigré is a cultural type that problematizes cross-cultural exchange: the movement of knowledge, skills, and ideologies across geographical and cultural time zones. However, the transactions through which émigrés negotiate the contours of inbetweenness, their unresolved position within, and toward, the host culture as well as their 'own', produces a subjectivity very different from the others who, as emissaries or couriers, cross borders but do not trouble them. The constant recalibration of their position between two cultural poles produces work with a particular valency, a flickering charge that reflects their double orientation.

In this sense being an émigré is as much a matter of a particular sensibility as it is an indication of political status or cultural prejudice. When the émigré is marked by differences in pigmentation or economic status, the sense of belonging and not belonging to their new country of residence is especially acute. Both settler-colonists and guest-workers provide poignant instances of this. In this paper, however, we are interested in pursuing the notion of émigré sensibility through a rarer (and, it could be argued, more rarified) set of examples: western professionals who moved to the 'third world' during the first flush of post-colonial independence and ended up spending their lives there.

Pierre Jeanneret, Laurie Baker, and Joseph Allen Stein arrived in India as western experts in the early fifties; they stayed on to become conscientious interlocutors of Indian building culture. Yet they did so not from positions of unreflected privilege; they were acutely aware of the cultural politics of their place in independent India. In a manner very different from their colonialist counterparts (whether the technocrats of the British Raj or the World Bank) their very 'whiteness' became a 'burden', a marker of their outsidership in freshly independent India. At the same time they did not put on the mantle of the modernist missionary, signalling instead through strategic self-effacement their abdication of

the roles conventionally ascribed to western expatriates and experts.

As émigrés who not only traveled east — to 'underdeveloped' India — but *went native*, their lives and work complicate our conventional reading of natives *becoming modern*: the now well-worn narrative of 'traveling west' (Ghosh, 35), literally and figuratively, for enlightenment. The term, going native, references the colonialists' fear of losing their cultural and political distinctiveness through contamination by, and absorption into, native life and customs (Ashcroft, 115). In British India, where the civilizing impulse personified by the white man's burden was carried on the shoulders of relatively few expatriates, there was an ever-present concern with cultural, social, and racial decorum. While duty called for a certain amount of cross-cultural consumption, adoption of native garb and customs, for example, put not only one's own subjectivity but also the entire community at risk.

In a similar manner, the rhetorics of becoming modern also play out the reconstitution of subjectivity and culture as a matter of degrees of separation from the cocoon of custom and tradition. Subcontinental reformers and modernizers through out the nineteenth and twentieth century have been obsessed with indexing modernity to help monitor cross-cultural commerce: new headgear (Vernaaiik, 28); new regimes of furniture; new fashions in domestic architecture, etc., serve as markers in this rite of passage

In the work of these three architects, the complementary and contradictory trajectories of going native and becoming modern are intertwined. Their work collapses and merges disparate traditions in ways that are both partial and transformative. It is this doubled movement, this paper argues, that gives their work a critical fluidity that sponsors productive comparison to a number of different configurations: to modernism at large and to modern architecture in India in particular; to the work of recognized Indian 'star' architects; and to Indian vernacular practice.

Unlike the work of the well-known western 'masters' and Indian stars, the work of Jeanneret, Baker, and Stein is

modest, conflicted, and not readily classifiable. Rather than reifying fixed categories of center/periphery, first/third, and developed/developing, it unravels them, interrogating in the process notions of culture as rooted and authentic and of modernity as something monolithic and of the west.

The trajectories described by these émigré architects also provide another vantage on the complex genealogy of modern architecture outside Europe and America, and on the diverse contexts within which the dilemmas of modernity are manifested. Unplotting their works and lives reframes not only the eurocentric assumptions of modernist discourse, but makes it possible to examine modern practices through local prisms as well.

Even a cursory examination of their work suggests that modern architecture may not necessarily follow a specific script, that it may appear locally in original and novel ways, that it is not necessarily disruptive, oppositional, avant-gardist, and redemptive. And that, in Arjun Appadurai's phrase, every society creates its own ways of playing with modernity, drawing upon a particular mix of sources and history.

Modern architectural culture in South Asia, for instance, is a rich, vibrant and varied enterprise that draws upon an extended cosmopolitan debate and a long history of cross-cultural encounter. It is heir to a diverse set of practices that, taken together, inform a locally grown modern vernacular, one that is not limited to a series of disjointed translations of the precepts and forms of the Euro-american modernism.

Critical discourse in architecture continues to see modernisms of color as somewhat off-color, as merely a secondary or variant phenomena, downmarket versions of mainstream metropolitan commodities, or in a more positive light, as part of the creolization of world culture. Neither these, nor earlier versions (seeing it in terms of a lost struggle between rooted tradition and universalizing modernity, or else conflating it with the establishment of nation states, cultural enfranchisement, and a progressive politics) get the whole story.

Travel and contacts are, as James Clifford suggests, crucial sites for an unfinished modernity (Clifford, 5). In this sense, displacement is potentially as constitutive of cultural meaning as rootedness. Émigrés put this insight into play through operations that re-root and re-route. For being an émigré is not only a matter of crossing borders but of occupying a borderland, a liminal cultural and psychological location.

The work of these émigrés is of enormous interest from a narrower, design-oriented perspective as well. It offers a rich account of the development of a formal and a tectonic language, a modern vernacular derived from the constraints of local materials, building conventions, and construction methods. What sets these architects apart from their more famous contemporaries is the degree to which they ground their buildings within local material culture, while acknowledging their position as professionals within global frames of reference. Their attempts to learn from local practices offers a poetics of building that does not impose extraordi-

nary solutions but rather deals directly with the conditions growing out of the work and its location.

The very different circumstances of their arrival and subsequent careers in India make a consideration of their work compelling. Pierre Jeanneret arrived in India in 1951 as part of Le Corbusier's team to design the new town of Chandigarh and to oversee the construction of the Capitol Complex. He stayed on to design numerous buildings and towns, serving as both the Head of the School of Architecture and the Chief Architect of Punjab State.

Laurie Baker returned to India in 1945 to work for a leprosy mission after having spent the war with the Friend's ambulance Unit. Until the mid-sixties he lived in a remote Himalayan village working with mountain tribesmen and village masons on small projects. For the last thirty years he has lived in Trivandrum working primarily on low cost projects for a client base that would otherwise not consult architects.

Joseph Allen Stein, an American midwesterner came to India in 1952 to become the head of the Bengal Engineering college in Calcutta. In 1955 he established an office in Delhi and has been there ever since. Much of his work has been for cultural institutions, and international foundations. Having studied under Saarinen at Cranbrook, and worked with Neutra and Garret Ekbo in California, Stein has seen India through a quite different set of lenses.

Baker's Anglo-Saxon empiricism and his Quaker background are worlds apart from Jeanneret's purist poetics and rationalist systems, giving their respective engagements with local vernaculars very different colorations. Unlike Baker and Jeanneret, who sublimated their modern training and started afresh, Stein's engagement of the local reflects the self-confident, and expansive vision, of mid-century modernism. Tracing their extended encounters with Indian material culture, reveals work that is contingent and modest, work that registers the pressures of the local on the self-image of the émigré.

Unlike the European or Indian 'masters' who aspire to a seamless synthesis (between west and east, old and new, tradition and modernity), the émigré sensibility recognizes the provisionality, and impossibility, of a transparent cross-cultural engagement. Even as they work in and across two architectural idioms, Stein, Baker, and Jeanneret do not aim at a singular reading of what modern Indian architecture is or could be. On the contrary, the modesty and integrity of their cross-cultural endeavor stems from the way in which their work "reiterates the absence that lies at the point of intersection between two cultures" (Ashcroft, 138).

#### LAURIE BAKER

While waiting for a ship back to England, Laurie Baker meets Gandhi in Bombay. These meetings convince him to return, and he does so in 1945 as an architect for a missionary organization that ran leprosy centers in India. He returns at the height of nationalist sentiment, when emotions against outsiders, foreigners, and especially Britishers are at a fever

pitch. He is sent to live with an elderly missionary couple to “learn the ropes”. This comes with unexpected shocks to his sense of self. He finds himself a “sahib”, living in a bungalow with servants, and having to conform to a rigid class and racial code that determines what was Done and not Done, what was expected behavior for an Englishman in India: riding a horse was appropriate but not a bicycle, dressing for dinner was mandatory (Bhatia, 223).

His work, rehabilitating old leper asylums into hospitals, raises other questions. He wonders who his real clients are: the mission, the doctors, or the patients themselves. The buildings, the construction methods, and the materials he is faced with leave him feeling quite alien:

During those first few months I felt increasingly ignorant and helpless. I felt less knowledgeable than the stupidest village idiot...I had brought with me my reference books and construction manuals, but a bundle of comic strips would have been as helpful (Bhatia, 225).

Gradually he awakens to a different paradigm, rebuilds himself from the ground up, discovers the basis for another approach to architectural practice. He’s fascinated by the skills of ordinary poor village people who are able to make useful, everyday things and houses from whatever materials are around them:

Slowly I realized that many of the answers to my problem... lay before me... that wherever I went I saw, in the local indigenous style of architecture, the results of thousands of years of research on how to use only immediately available local materials to make structurally sound buildings that could cope with local climatic conditions, with the local geography and topography... that could accommodate all the requirements of local religious, social, and cultural patterns of living (Bhatia, 226).

Transforming these discoveries into useful knowledge, however, is another matter altogether. He says, “I realized I was merely a witness to these apparently endless indigenous skills and was in no way capable of implementing them so early after my ‘discovery’ [of them] (Bhatia, 226). It is at this point that the long slow apprenticeship starts, the gradual assimilation of local knowledge, and the identification with the indigenous.

I tried to design buildings in such a way that they would not be offensive or unacceptable to my real clients, the users of the buildings, and so that they would meet their needs and not be an offense to the eyes of the people with whom I had chosen to live (Bhatia, 226).

During his first seventeen years in India he lives with his Indian doctor wife in a remote Himalayan village helping build hospitals, schools, and houses. “During this period”, he says, “I actually did acquire quite a lot of the skills which had so fascinated me” (Bhatia, 227). His increasing expertise

in building with local materials and techniques results in his being seen as an interlocutor, someone who could bridge between local and professional idioms. He is sought out by non-governmental organizations who ask him to build their socially progressive projects: literacy villages, psychiatric hospitals etc. In 1963 he moves to Trivandrum, in the southern, and tropical, state of Kerala. Here he begins the process of learning a completely different construction and material vernacular. But by this time he has distilled his experiences into operative principles: that buildings should be simple, efficient and inexpensive, and that their design should draw from, and extend the vernacular, which embodies hundreds of years of research in building methods.

Working on a daily basis with clients with extremely limited means, on projects where architects and engineers are not required — for, as he says, nothing “either can do is usually built for four or five thousand rupees” — doesn’t result in a romanticization of the vernacular. On the contrary, he is acutely aware of market forces: the rise of labor costs, the scarcity of non-renewable, and even renewable materials (like timber for roofing), and the loss of certain crafts as a society develops. These pressures help him conceptualize tradition, as well as his place within it:

My observation is that vernacular architecture almost always has apt solutions to all our problems of building. All that is required is to go a step further with the research our forefathers have done — that is, add on our twentieth century experience to improve on what already has been accomplished. But this addition should be a contribution, not a contradiction (Bhatia, 237).

Tradition as an unfolding, a bearing forth from the past into the present, rather than as a calcified authenticity, in a fraught balancing act with an equally monolithic modernity. It doesn’t come as a surprise, then, that his relationship with the allure of the modern and the effects of modernization are quite conflicted. He looks at the examples of modern architecture around him and finds it an arrogant, anonymous, senseless jumble, with no harmony, unity, or honesty with itself, with its neighbors, or its environment. Modern appurtenances simply efface or neutralize issues of climate or social patterns.

He singles out the use of concrete as particularly pernicious. “Modern Portland cement came and suddenly our slow, steady evolutionary building process came to a devastating halt... Can’t we be modern with other materials besides reinforced concrete, glass, and aluminum trimmings? (Bhatia, 242). He is particularly critical of the formal flourishes of modern architects: the “functionless protrusions, frills, and fins” (an obvious reference to the wholesale adoption of the *brise soleil*), the cladding that hides, the unvarying use of a plastic material such as concrete in gridular frames, and the gimmicks foisted upon by architectural masters.

“One man puts in two large circular holes in functionless walls, and in no time the whole city produces round holes in

functionless walls" (Bhatia, 255). Though he rarely makes references in interviews to the Indian work of Corbusier and Kahn, statements such as these clearly convey what he thinks of the work produced by the itinerant masters of modern architecture. Yet, despite this antipathy, both his design procedures and the high moral tone of his rhetoric contain significant vestiges of his architectural training in the heroic age of modernism. (He was in school during the thirties). His constant refrain of honesty: to materials, to the clients' needs, to the desired function; his abhorrence of applied decoration, and ornamentation; in his own words, his "anti-facadeism."

Like other modern Indian architects, he sidesteps the whole issue of decoration, the worked richness and elaboration that is a mark of pre-colonial Indian architecture. For him, in a sense, architectural design ought not to be primarily a vehicle for extra-architectural symbolism. As an outsider, certainly, to wade into these murky waters would be dangerous. His religious buildings stay clear of iconography, preferring to essay the spiritual through a material directness, as he does in all his buildings.

Over the past forty years, and through well over a thousand projects, Laurie Baker has distilled a limited set of building elements and formal and site design strategies. His fragmentary and idiosyncratic compositions result from a strict adherence to a code of minimizing cost and site work. Trees are never cut, nor is the site regraded. The serendipitous plasticity of the forms and the spaces results from the rigors that this modernist fakir imposes upon himself.

Some of the characteristic elements of his vernacular: load-bearing brick walls (single-brick bonds, nine-inch rat-trap, or 4 1/2 inch stretcher bond); endless variations on half-brick screens between inside and outside spaces; double walls with occupiable cavities; brick corbelling or lintels over windows and doors; unplastered or white-washed brick surfaces; integral decorative patterning by varying the proportion of mortar to brick; curvilinear, segmented plan shapes (for structural support, reducing the surface area of the envelope, working around existing site conditions); concrete roof slabs (when necessary) but usually folded plate, with the space between the reinforcing bars filled with brick or broken clay tile, reducing the cost by a third); built-in furniture worked into the segmented plans; overhanging eaves.

The cost reductions are radical: savings of 80 percent over conventional building costs. Needless to say this requires him to work outside the conventional structures of the building industry and its protocols. Over the years he has trained his own teams of carpenters, masons, and bricklayers. While periodically officialdom has made overtures, his activism, too, has put him beyond the pale, too native for even the native elite.

In the 1970s, when interest in intermediate, adaptive, or appropriate technologies captured the interest of the architectural mainstream, his work achieved a certain disciplinary currency, yet never to the same degree as the work of Hassan

Fathy, for example. This is not surprising, for in crucial ways, Baker's work was never positioned the same way as Fathy's. Fathy, after all, was an insider, someone reviving traditional forms and crafts in terms that a western audience understood: romanticized and high-minded transpositions of folk forms, a recuperation of the ethnic authentic in the face of modernity's deprivations.

As an outsider working the inside, an emissary neither from, or to, the west, as a deracinated modern architect who re-rooted himself, Baker's allegiances are both narrower and more radical. Bearing neither the burden of a white man's modernism, nor the albatross of authenticity, Baker maneuvers in a fluid, and vital, borderland. Working within the grain of a particular vernacular, he has reterritorialized his subjectivity, demarcating for himself a rich architectural terrain as well.

### PIERRE JEANNERET

Pierre Jeanneret was fifty-four when he came to India as part of his cousin's team. Ironically it was in Chandigarh, the high noon of heroic modernism, that he was able to release himself from the shadow of his older cousin's influence, as well as from allegiance to the emancipatory polemics of modern architecture. It is in India, during the last fifteen years of his life, that both he and his work come into their own, incorporating the modest and diffident voice of the émigré rather than the trumpeting of the reforming expert, a posture he never was quite comfortable inhabiting.

Arriving in India was a revelation and it results in a reorientation of his subjectivity and of his concerns as an architect. He writes to Jose Luis Sert soon after his arrival: "My greatest concern now is to employ as many men as possible. After having for years tried my hardest to find ways of replacing human labor with machinery, I never thought I would one day be reconsidering the problem from a different angle: that of trying to give work to the greatest possible number of men." (Cauquil, 105).

He sets himself to learning the ways of life in northern India, and the specificities of Indian construction. His close and empathetic observation of local techniques, of climate, of materials, informs his desire to work within the "ethical and technical context of the country". Clay brick, river stone, and a limited use of prefabricated reinforced concrete elements become his palette from which he develops a formal language that affords easy implementation, reduced cost, and rapid execution.

Brick is the most suitable material for Chandigarh. It is not the over-compressed type but rather it is oven-baked, having a lovely color and lined texture, similar to the palm of the hand and to my mind very beautiful. I have used this brick as much as possible, to erect clay walls and sun-breakers, to make walls which let through the air while keeping the sun and rain out; walls which give shade, which have recesses and projections, and for floor coverings and pillars, without shying away

from their large sections.. the more and bigger they are the better they keep the sun out; in fact all sorts of shapes, but always close to the realities of construction (Cauquil, 107).

Passages such as these index both his sensitivity to his adopted landscape as well as the lens of the aesthete — of line, form, and color — that he shared with his cousin and other modernists. And in a sense it is this doubled perspicuity, the ability to look at things from both near and far away, that gives the idiom he and his colleagues developed for Chandigarh its formal coherence and its material and rhetorical richness. By using the limited materials at their disposal in many different combinations, they developed a pattern book for weaving the fabric of a city built from scratch.

In putting together a new idiom for architecture based on local materials and techniques, and respectful of cultural and budgetary restrictions, Pierre Jeanneret took on a tremendous task, equal in importance to the rhetorical bravura of the language Le Corbusier unleashed in the buildings of the capitol complex. While Corbusier's heroic idiom in concrete, to quote Charles Correa, proved to be a catalyst of staggering import, the Chandigarh pattern book was more modest, conflicted, and porous to variation. It was almost immediately assimilated into the vernacular of the indigenous builder-contractor.

Both Laurie Baker and Jeanneret assembled vernaculars for popular use. Yet the procedures each followed illustrate their individual trajectories. Where Jeanneret drew upon the tropic range of early modernism to assemble his elements, Laurie Baker reconfigures the everyday environment of his clients in endless idiosyncratic combinations.

While fifty years of living and working in India have given Laurie Baker a sense of the legitimacy of his endeavors, Jeanneret at the end of his life remained unsettled. As the hagiography surrounding his cousin, the modern master, continued to grow, it eclipsed his own work in Chandigarh and his sense of it. In a poignant, final interview he said,

"The approach I discovered in India taught me self-esteem, after the many failures encountered in France. Yet, when all is said and done, I think Le Corbusier was right: conveniences, subsistence, these are not solutions. . . we should have struggled for the conditions of civilization. . . he, who always referred to a higher logic, could he forgive my drawing so close to the Indian methods of execution, and my team work with them?" (Cauquil, 109).

## JOSEPH ALLEN STEIN

Of the three it is perhaps Stein's career in India that best illuminates the relative position of the émigré in a century defined by nation-states and other imagined communities. Unlike Baker whose relocation to India and commitment to particular communities was inspired by Gandhian and Quaker

ideals of service. Stein's inspirational mix was a headier recipe of mid-century American can-do, internationalist spirit, and Nehruvian promise. Newly-independent India was

"a very stimulating, extraordinarily interesting time...it was like coming to the United States when Thomas Jefferson was alive... Nehru was Prime Minister, who was an outstanding man. He had his flaws...but he was an extraordinarily beautiful and intelligent man, and he cast an aura over India that was very attractive" (White, 35).

From the very beginning of his career in India, Stein identified with and participated in this vast nation-building enterprise. As the perfect go-between, (the western point person with contacts at the highest level within the political and cultural elite in India and amongst the architectural luminaries of the West Coast), Stein received many commissions from American non-profit foundations that became the basis of his practice. Yet what makes these projects unique is that he did not turn them into either exercises in the projection of a Pax Americana, nor attempts at articulating a modern Indian style. Instead they are part of an idiosyncratic and non-partisan exploration that neither identifies with particular architectural camps nor stakes a polemical position for itself, finding its justification in its dispassionate yet intimate relation to local and contingent conditions: the people for whom it is built, the materials of construction, the qualities of the site.

In contrast to the more isolated practices of Jeanneret and Baker, Stein has been part of the mainstream of Indian practice. Over the past forty years he has had his own New Delhi-based firm, working in partnership with Indian peers (Doshi, Bhalla) and more recently, with younger partners who apprenticed with him. The work produced ranges widely: from the showcase institutional work mentioned above, to factories, and low-cost housing prototypes. With each Stein has experimented with a particular formal vocabulary, construction technology, and material and tectonic language. In its range and variety, the work exemplifies a personal dictum: to "seek the character of the solution in the nature of the problem" (White, 23). Unlike the pre-packaged solutions of the global superstar, or the elixirs of the traveling salesman, the careful interventions of Stein exhibit the émigré's posture of detached engagement, of a commitment to place without the rhetoric of belonging.

What makes an émigré stay? For unlike the exile, the émigré can pack her bags and move on. Cultural affinity plays a part, as in the case of these three. One could argue that their cultural and intellectual biographies predisposed them to an appreciation of the Indian milieu; that each was already displaced and was looking for where that displacement would find itself at home. Certainly an ability and a desire to sort through one's own cultural baggage is crucial to an understanding of oneself and wherever one happens to be. In response to a much-asked question, Stein says: "Why do I

continue to live and work in India? I think India offers the great possibility of beauty with simplicity. This is a rare and little understood thing in the world today; yet one sees it here in so many different ways" (White, 35).

The vantage of the émigré offers a particular strategy for cross-cultural engagement. In talking of Stein, the Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi says:

Joe looked at India, he looked at the heritage of India, at the Indian climate, the Indian ethos...but he was never overpowered by these. That is the reason he ... does not make an attempt to look back to the Indian tradition the way we would see it. Because we are more concerned with the identity of India in terms of our own nostalgic value, and we have to prove our identity. He has not to prove an identity because after all he is himself different ... So if Joe looks at architecture, he can look at it as it is there. He has to learn something from these things, but he does not have to be enamoured by them (White, 17).

Ultimately, however, the émigré pays a price for this 'difference'. For despite all the work, the *Padma Shri*'s (the highest honor India bestows on foreigners) and other accolades, the work of Stein, Jeanneret, and Baker has not

received recognition in the west they left behind; even in India their reception is muted and limited to narrow circles. But perhaps this is to be expected, for to be an émigré is to slip through the cracks.

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