



David Baker gave up his car in 2002 and now bikes to construction sites, including 888 Seventh St. Visiting job sites out of town requires planning.

SPENCER BROWN

Iconoclast of design

Baker has become one of the Bay Area's most influential architects by testing limits and changing the usual rules of the game

BY J.K. DINEEN

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Emerald Fund President Oz Erickson recalls the first time he saw the unorthodox pea greens, mustard yellows and ultramarine blues his architect, David Baker, had selected for the outside of Emerald's new SoMa Residences.

"I looked at it and said, 'Over my dead body,'" remembered Erickson.

It was not the first time Erickson had balked at one of Baker's designs. But, as usual, he eventually came around to the architect's vision.

"It's like his brain works at a slightly different kilter than most humans," said Erickson. "We developers are pretty conservative folks. Sometimes we have to be brought along kicking and screaming."

A quarter century since founding David Baker + Partners, the architect is one of the Bay Area's most influential and widely copied designers. Specializing in infill housing, both market-rate and affordable, Baker's small, 20-person practice is responsible for more than 3,000 housing units either built or under construction. Some 1,500 units more are in the pipeline, plus a smattering of hotels, office projects, and custom houses.

With a style that amounts to a sort of three-dimensional collage, Baker is known for using a wide variety of materials and textures, bays and gables, not to mention colors. In the development-averse Bay Area, the eclectic approach can help appease neighbors who object to the sort of massing needed to create density. In one project alone, Holliday Development's Dutch-style townhouse Blue Star Corner in Emeryville, Baker used six facade materi-

als to give the project visual variety.

"He takes what could be overwhelming, homogenous block and turns it into something more village-like," said Mitchell Schwarzer, an architecture historian.

He's also known for a restless creativity and intellect that can be alternately inspiring and infuriating. And at a time when architects and developers are desperate to be seen as more sustainable and greener than the next guy, Baker stands out as the real deal: He lives in the Mission District, bikes everywhere and gave up his last car, a diesel Volkswagen bug, in 2002.

He is known to show up on job sites on his bike to check on a lighting fixture — something that can be trickier when he is working on projects in

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Baker's designs for a high-end hotel in Truckee is intentionally similar to one for an affordable housing project.

BAKER: Baker is seen as real deal at a time when everyone wants to be green

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Healdsburg or Truckee.

"When we go to Tahoe, we have got to figure out how to get Baker up there," said Rick Holliday, founder of Holliday Development and longtime client of Baker.

As an eco-friendly designer, Baker is building on a family tradition. Baker's father — a self-trained architect who toiled as a junkyard operator, gardener, and farm worker — built modernist rammed-earth solar-powered houses in Arizona and Michigan. The family house was full of architecture books, and by age 10, Baker had torn through biographies of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier and decided designing buildings was what he would do.

After finishing his architecture degree at Berkeley, Baker partnered with ELS Architects on a solar design company called Sol-Arc from 1977 to 1982. In 1982 he started his own firm with a couple of colleagues, one of whom — Peter MacKenzie — is a partner in the current firm. Around the same time Baker met Holliday, who was just starting Bridge Housing Corp., today the largest non-profit developer in California. Holliday tapped the inexperienced firm to design an affordable housing project near Kezar Stadium in San Francisco.

"We took a lot of grief because we were expected to hire more established names," said Holliday. "The mayor's office got calls from disaffected architects."

Holliday has gone on to use Baker for a slew of notable developments, including the Parkview Commons near UCSF, the Clocktower building in SoMa, Iron Horse Lofts in Walnut Creek, and Pacific Cannery in West Oakland.

Baker tends to do at least 50 percent of his work in affordable housing, working with the Tenderloin

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Neighborhood Development Corp. in addition to Bridge Housing and AF Evans.

AF Evans Vice President Craig Adelman said Baker "shares the values of the affordable housing movement combined with tremendous design sensibility." While affordable units may be bare-boned compared with high-end condos, the costs are often as high. In projects like the Curran House on Taylor Street and the SoMa Studios, Baker has put more money into common areas — laundry rooms, rooftop gardens, and community gathering places.

"There are things we can do in affordable that are not driven by rentable square foot," said Adelman.

On a recent visit to his offices at the clocktower building Baker pointed to drawings for the LEED-gold Armstrong Senior housing in the Bayview District, which were adorned with samples of the Ghanaian fabrics and Malian mudcloth that were inspirations for the projects colors.

Next to the Armstrong drawings were sketches for a hotel in Truckee.

"If you look at these, it's hard to tell the high-end hotel from the affordable housing," said Baker. "That's the way we think it should be."

With a focus on affordable, many of Baker's projects have avoided the vitriolic planning politics that have shelved so many urban infill projects. Still, he has watched some projects wither on the vine.

Four years into the process, his 408-unit Daggett Place project in the Dogpatch neighborhood is indefinitely stalled, caught up in San Francisco's eastern neighborhoods planning process. And on the corner of Fulton and Gough streets, a 120-unit development for homeless families is on hold as Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi pushes to increase the development fees in the Market-Octavia area.

The impasses can get frustrating, Baker admits.

"I'm basically a socialist myself, but at some point, you add enough fees and people don't build anything," he said. "You can't fund everything on the back of the new guy on the block."

While Baker has referred to himself as a "radical hippie," clients say he runs one of the most efficient architecture shops around. In 1982, Baker was the first Bay Area architect to take out an AutoCAD license, which sped up how fast his office could produce drawings. Back in 1993, Holliday remembers Baker telling him he was learning HTML and was busy building a web site.

"I remember thinking, 'what the hell is that?'" said Holliday.

Baker has the ability to keep all the mundane engineering and safety code details in mind even as he focuses on the more creative aspects of design.

"The boring stuff, he has all that in his head," said Holliday. "He has a mind like a Rubik's cube and runs all these variables through all at once."

That pays off for his clients.

Kevin Wakelin, the Holliday Group CEO who is in the process of launching the Vibrant Group — a green-oriented development company — said Baker "can return you a greater margin per square foot than most architects can.

"He gets the best bang for your buck in net sellable square footage. There is more usability and functionality in his 1,000 square feet than in the average Joe architect's 1,500 square feet," said Wakelin. "When you have Baker on your side, you have a shot of adrenaline on your side."

Metrovation Capital principal Merritt

Sher, who hired Baker to do the Hotel Healdsburg and a condo project at 200 Second St., said you never know when Baker will appear.

"He shows up on his bike at 9 o'clock at night," Sher said. "Cocktail hour is over. It's the middle of winter and raining and there he is on his bike. It's the charm and quirkiness of personality that make things fun and interesting."

The restless can make it difficult for Baker to focus on the dull parts of development, Wakelin said. He could get easily distracted, talking about new bike hook designs or green roof concepts rather than fire exits. He recently took up a new hobby that keeps him occupied and focused in meetings: knitting.

"The best thing that ever happened to David," said Wakelin.

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Baker's design for housing is under construction at 888 Seventh St., in San Francisco.

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