

At Home in the Modern World

# dwell

## RENOVATE IT!

Modern Homes With Old Bones

dwell.com

June 2008

\$5.99 US



0 74470 35055 2

0 6>

**A WORLD WITHOUT  
PARKING SPACES**

**AIR-TIGHT DESIGN**  
Green Insulation

**MADRID AFTER DARK**

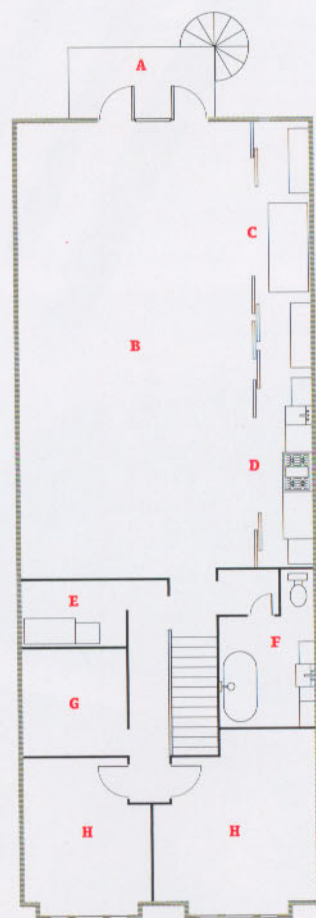


# Mission Statement Project: upShift Location: San Francisco, California Architect: David Baker + Partners

Story by Deborah Bishop  
Photos by Dave Lauridsen



A house that survived the Great Quake and the intervening decades reborn after a serious intervention by a modern architect. David Baker's carefully crafted rehabilitation kept the bones of the building intact, while letting in light and air and creating a new relationship between the structure and the street.



**upShift  
Floor Plan**

- A Deck
- B Living/Dining
- C Office
- D Kitchen
- E Utility
- F Bathroom
- G Closet
- H Bedroom

David Baker's Ed is painted with same slightly sp micaceous iron-p paint as the Syc Harbor Bridge; t color is Quarry vitrines frontin art studio are at whim to the of passersby. T gate to the rig to a passageway once led to the







The kitchen and Baker's home office, which has artwork and inspiration pinned above the desk, are aligned behind sliding fiberglass-and-bamboo shoji screens. Devoid of cabinetry, the kitchen is fitted out with industrial cantilevered shelving from E-Z Shelving Systems in Kansas City. The red tiles behind the stove are from Heath Ceramics.

There may be any number of architects with a passion for knitting, but David Baker is the first I've met. I envy him his scarf, a smaller version of the 40-foot-long, collaboratively knit strip of colors, patterns, and textures he was preparing to wrap around his Christmas tree when we met in his renovated Edwardian in San Francisco last December.

"This is the fifth house I've designed for myself," says Baker, sounding not unhopeful that it might also be his last. A hybrid of Japanese simplicity and carefully crafted experiments—such as an almost complete absence of doorknobs—the building is a meeting place for many of Baker's influences, from Toyo Ito's house in Tokyo to his father, Bernard Baker, a migrant farmer, sculptor, and self-taught architect who built the rammed-earth passive-solar house in which Baker grew up.

The abundance of thoughtful, customized, and even quirky details might lead one to believe he specializes in single-family dwellings, but in fact, the focus of Baker's firm is high-density, mixed-use urban housing—some in the kind of neighborhoods that tend to be described as "gritty." Anything but cookie cutter, the environmentally attuned projects win awards for the grace notes—light, gardens, color—that humanize daily life for their occupants, whatever their income levels.

"Gritty" is a moniker that might also be applied to the sunny stretch of the Mission District where Baker makes his home. When he bought the property with his former life partner, designer and artist Jane Martin, its potential was all but buried beneath discarded appliances and a patchwork of illegal additions that took over most of the open space. "There were about 20 people living in this warren of windowless rooms," recalls Baker, "along with assorted pit bulls, cats, and chickens. Whenever someone wanted to expand, they just nailed on some Sheetrock and a new roof."

Built in the years just before the 1906 earthquake, the compound originally contained a ground-floor grocery store and delivery service with living quarters in the back, and an upstairs flat with its own entrance. The side carriageway led to the rear stables. Taking everything down to the studs, Baker and Martin kept the original layout, with Martin transforming the downstairs workspace into her design studio. Now Baker's painting and sewing studio, it is separated from a small rear apartment by an aluminum door. Where the stables once stood is a wood shop for fabricating casework and architectural models.

"I liked that the building had a history, but that the storefront was boarded up," says Martin. "It freed me to do my own interpretation." Seeking to pull in light and air without sacrificing security, she designed and helped fabricate the new facade of clear and textured glass vitrines. The window boxes provide a platform for an ever-changing installation of art and artifacts—and the occasional bowl of tadpoles—offering pedestrians a reason to stop and engage in a kind of codified voyeurism. Because the windows are 15 inches deep, people can peer in without seeing through to the room. "It's a much friendlier statement than sticking bars over a window," says Martin.

Air flows in through the row of clerestory windows, "a nod to the original building," and an aluminum Dutch door. Nearly as secure as a bank vault when closed, top or bottom can be left open to the street. Baker similarly replaced the roll-up door to the walkway with an ipe wood gate, a graceful balance of privacy and transparency, and an expression of faith in a transitioning neighborhood. (The spanking new studios of ODC Dance Commons moved in next door.)

Facing the street in the most original part of the house are the two upstairs bedrooms. The kitchen





and home office are aligned against one wall of the great room, behind a three-panel system of fiberglass-and-bamboo shoji screens that can be variously arranged according to the occasion and degree of disarray. "Rooms in Japanese houses can be reconfigured just by sliding some doors," says Baker. "As a messy person who likes things orderly, this approach allows me to contain the mess without radically changing myself."

Dotted with seating areas and impromptu assemblages, the space is illuminated from glass doors that lead to a rear deck and a row of windows along the pitch of the roof, which is on the side rather than in the center. "It was one of the advantages of designing in 3-D, because I could see instantly how moving the window solved the problem of where to put the transfer beam—and the asymmetry feels more dynamic." He discovered another benefit when he went on the roof to wash the solar panels, and found that rain falling over the steeper angle had rinsed them clean.

The room is a comfortable, crafted arrangement of furniture designed by Baker and his friends and associates, and pieces he grew up with—such as the Saarinen swivel chairs, Robsjohn-Gibbings chaise, and Swedish rya rug hooked by his mother in the '60s. Three generations of Baker art—David's paintings, his father's sculptures, and work by his eldest daughter, Claire—mingle with work by local artists. And there is a collaborative component in the form of a designated graffiti wall: "Some houseguests got wildly drunk when I was away, and it seemed a good idea to have a spot to contain artistic energy," he explains, somewhat deadpan.

Baker, who long ago traded in his car for a bicycle, incorporated a number of green approaches, including a thermosiphon system to collect and heat water for his home. Instead of using a pump to circulate the fluid through the solar panels, the heat

The bathroom (below) glows with various shades of Turkish-style glass tiles (in Iris) from Galleria Tile in San Francisco; the customized nickel-plated hardware is from Chicago Faucets. David Baker sits on the Plyboo bed (right) of his own design; it was fabricated by Julianna Sassaman.

**i p.242**



of the sun powers it; the system also qualifies for a \$2,000 federal income-tax credit. A spiral staircase descends from the glass deck to the rain garden, which replaced a concrete pad. Water is directed from the roof to the side planters of bamboo and horsetail and into a permeable filter beneath the pebbles, meeting the LEED water mandate to eliminate runoff. And the back of the house is a crazy quilt of recycled shingling. Arranged in color blocks are remnants of projects by people such as Frank Gehry, Herzog & de Meuron, Daniel Libeskind, and Steven Holl, fabricated by the A. Zahner Company in Kansas City. "It's very illustrious scrap!" says Baker. "And at certain times of day they shoot these lovely rays of color onto the garden."

Outside and in, Baker's personal mark is everywhere—in the custom Plyboo casework and beds, the entryway wall made from iridescent fabric embedded between panes of glass, and the aforementioned lack of doorknobs. "Designing for yourself gives you a rare chance to experiment without driving your clients crazy," he says, explaining the various latch and magnet systems he devised for the doors to the bedrooms, bath, and deck. "I was working on a log cabin in Jackson Hole and got interested in authentic construction, where people had time to whittle their door latches. I liked the notion of doing something more primitive and preindustrial," adds Baker, channeling his inner William Morris. "And there's a practical advantage, because the doors fold flat and become part of the architecture."

When a modernist gets hold of a century-old house, there's no telling how it will turn out. Baker's layering of practical industrialism and personal details—such as the steel entry rail encased in its own colorful wool "cozy" (courtesy of Baker's friend and knitting teacher, Jessica Cunningham)—is one approach to embracing the present without enshrining or obliterating the past. ▶





A dedicated cyclist, Baker suspends his bikes using a rope-and-pulley system. Paco Prieto of Pacassa Studios designed the small table upon which the pumpkin rests; the dining table was designed by Baker and fabricated by Thomas Jameson. The painting is by local artist Rex Ray. The living room (opposite) is a comfortable mélange of pieces Baker grew up with, such as the Robsjohn-Gibbons chaise, and ones he's added, such as the Frank Gehry Power Play club chair. ► p. 242













Baker's winsome collection of dolls includes the behatted figure known in Czech folklore as the Hesterman, who drags naughty children to a watery demise. The rain garden (opposite) is framed by bamboo on one side and horsetail on the other. A filter fabric beneath the pebbles helps direct water from the roof into the planters and the ground, eliminating runoff. ■■■

