



The Context Artist David Baker

San Francisco architect David Baker's childhood influenced his work in an unusually direct way. Baker's father, a one-time migrant farm worker with a ninth-grade education and a junkyard business, had a life-changing epiphany at age 52: He read the autobiography of Frank Lloyd Wright and decided to move his family from Michigan to Arizona so that he could begin building solar-heated, rammed-earth homes.

After dropping out of college in 1970, the younger Baker—by then a self-described “radical hippie” whose vocational direction had been honed by years of hanging around his father's job sites as a child, and reading autobiographies of great architects—hitchhiked from Michigan to California to work as a graphic artist for an underground newspaper. Seven years later, while finishing his master's degree in architecture at UC Berkeley, he co-founded an architectural consulting firm specializing in solar- and energy-conserving building principles. (He refers to his time at Cal as “my re-entry into mainstream society.”) In 1982, he founded his current firm, David Baker and Partners, and began designing the angular, asymmetrical housing complexes he is known for.

Two such projects—the high-density, high-design Iron Horse Lofts and the lower-cost Coggins Square family

apartments—have recently arisen in Walnut Creek, adjacent to the Pleasant Hill BART station. Together these projects typify much of Baker's work. The 54 townhouses in the Iron Horse Lofts, each of which is actually a tall, narrow, three-story live/work space, are distinguished by jutting saw-tooth roofs, airy glass-and-metal awnings, large expanses of asymmetrically paned windows, and splashes of bright exterior color (such as the hot red entry doors). The neighboring Coggins Square complex, which is comprised of 87 apartments surrounding two courtyards, incorporates a range of shapes—such as the semicircular, four-story entry that melds into squared-off wings on either side—and is embellished with metal cross-bracing and a palette of colors that rivals those of Iron Horse Lofts.

Rick Holliday, the developer behind those lofts (and the man known to the Bay Area building industry as the “loft king”) says, “I hire Dave because he brings something other than the humdrum to the suburbs. He's not afraid to fight through a design review to create something distinctive.”

Baker expresses his own goals somewhat differently. “There's a tendency for life to become generic, especially in the suburbs. So we try to create a sense of place.” There can be no more appropriate aim for the son of a Frank Lloyd Wright acolyte.