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Causes close to the heart

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San Francisco Architect David Baker's work ethic can be summed up in two words — "obsessively creative."

Baker, whose firm, David Baker + Partners Architects, recently designed the stylish, 98-unit affordable housing complex at Folsom and Dore streets, explains that his work provides the true adventure of his life.



"It's not like we have a job we have to go to and then have our real life," Baker said. "We get our enjoyment doing the best projects we can."

Baker, whose major mode of transportation in San Francisco is a bicycle, is committed not only to good design, but to energy efficient innovations. He also wants to do his part to support San Francisco's 10-year plan to end homelessness.

The Folsom Dore Supportive Apartments, which celebrated its grand opening in April, are now home to people who had struggled for years to find a permanent home. In addition to those who had been chronically homeless, the complex serves people with disabilities and those who have been diagnosed with AIDS or are HIV positive.

Other units are closer to market rate. "It's a potpourri of mixed income," Baker said.

The \$26.5 million project, backed by the nonprofit Citizen's Housing Corp. also includes a front entry courtyard, community rooms, a rear yard and tot lot, as well as offices for social workers to provide counseling and support for residents. Funding came from a variety of sources, including state housing funds, tax credits, tax-exempt bonds and financing from the Mayor's Office of Housing.

"Green" elements — such as a solar power system — are incorporated throughout the design, which has already received several awards, including the 2005 Pacific Coast Builders Conference Gold Nugget Grand

Award for Best Sustainable Residential Neighborhood.

The corridors open to the elements, providing fresh air and sunlight. The complex's stairways may wrap around a giant bamboo plant or enjoy the warmth from an overhead skylight.

The pressure on architects to design attractive affordable housing is even greater because of lingering negative perceptions about such projects.

The development of consistently high quality projects belies that impression.

"Typically when local politicians come to these (dedications) they say, 'I thought this was a high-end luxury project,'" Baker said.

A key element of the Folsom Dore design is "an active street" edge, which is achieved in part with the preservation of the front façade of the site's original brick warehouse.

"The idea was to try to make it integral to the building," Baker said.

Baker and his team — including project architect Daniel Simons — also gave careful consideration to the colors they used throughout the design. "We treat color as a material," Baker said.

The project's limited parking includes four spaces reserved as a "pod" for the nonprofit City CarShare program that offers members the use of its pool of cars as an alternative to owning a car.

For Baker, the success of the Folsom Dore Apartments is embodied by the sight he sees during his bicycle rides — residents enjoying their balconies.

The Folsom Dore Supportive Apartments will be included in the upcoming home tour, San Francisco Living, sponsored by the American Institute of Architects, San Francisco chapter and its new Center for Architecture + Design. The homes will be open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 17 or 18. Tickets, which go on sale Aug. 15 can be purchased at www.aiasf.org/hometours or by dialing (415) 362-7397.

David Baker

Age: 55

Family: Partner, Jane Martin; children, Claire Baker, 22; John Baker, 13; Anne Baker, 10.

Hometown: San Francisco

Education: Masters of architecture, University of California at Berkeley

Books reading: "Collapse," "Guns, Germs and Steel," "The Third Chimpanzee" and "Why is Sex Fun," all by Jared Diamond.

Favorite quote: "Every morning I awake torn between a desire to save the world and an inclination to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day. But if we forget to savor the world, what possible reason do we have for saving it?"— E.B. White

Inspirational figure: Architect Joe Esherick