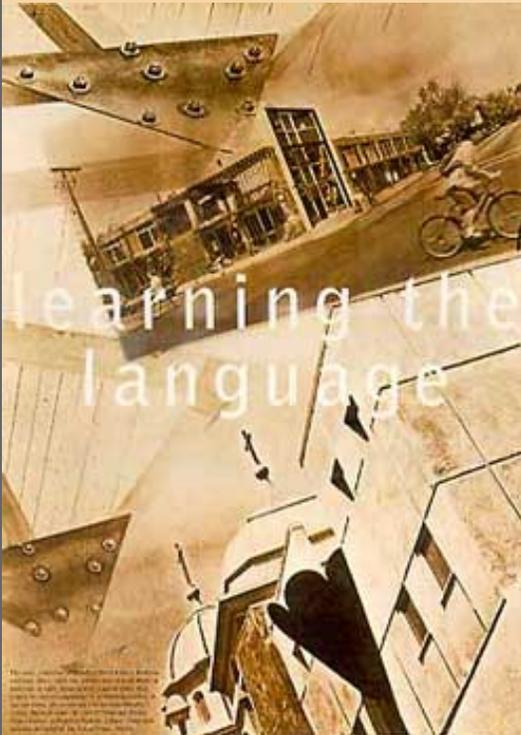


learning the language

By Cathy Lang Ho
Photos by Beatriz Coll

Metropolis Magazine

July/August, 1993. pp. 46-51, p.62



By designing funky, often outrageous buildings and using local artisans to construct them, San Francisco architect David Baker has given fresh expression to the Bay Area spirit.

Many of the world's mature cities have an architectural hero or two - favored figures to whom the identity of the city is closely bound, or indeed, perhaps even indebted. Karl Friedrich Schinkel shaped Berlin, John Nash gave London its center, Chicago had Burnham as well as the Bauhäuslers. Now Berkeley, to be sure, is no Berlin, and David Baker, alas, no Schinkel, but similarities nevertheless exist: the 42-year-old architect is responsible for more buildings within the small radius of Berkeley's active center - where the domineering, parental University of California abuts the misbehaving Telegraph Avenue - than any other architect. This carnivalesque quarter is the stage where an improbable cast convenes: ethnically, politically, and economically diverse inhabitants, typical of a university town, wind their way down Telegraph daily, past the ever-constant jewelry and tie-dye street vendors; clean-cut and grungy students alike are asked for spare change at every turn by the homeless who camp out in nearby People's Park; colorfully coiffed punk teens ditch high school to hang out at the used-record stores; graduate students hold office hours in the many perpetually packed cafés. Up until the mid-Eighties or so, the liveliness of the street scene always diverted attention - and importance - from the neighborhood's architecture, which had acquired, through a sort of urban attrition, a part-neglected, part-purposeful punk appearance. The buildings on Telegraph have always been an unambitious backdrop of basic infill structures, lacking any strong, unifying characteristic or stylistic continuity.

Then came David Baker, who found the area's lack of style or definitive context to be a welcome mat of sorts. His overtly designed spaces - most were built from 1984 to 1989 - include two cafés, a restaurant/brew pub, a church addition, and, not far away, a retail/office building, plus, now in the works, an SRO (single-room occupancy) building, and University student housing. Fanciful and drama-bent, Baker's work is a sort of high-style, fragmented form of Post-Modernism that showcases the architect's penchant for asymmetry, for turning volumes just a notch off primary axes, for mixing references, shapes, and surfaces.

Some examples are Café Milano, where a colonnaded, façade-like wall that supports the mezzanine cuts diagonally through the cavernous interior to effect the feel of a sidewalk café; Hodgkin Hall, a church addition, is a collage of neighborhood styles that

runs from Spanish Revival to Sixties Brutalism; and the starkly geometric tavern, Bison Brewing Company, a megaphone-shaped building that tapers to a point suspended over the rear parking lot. Its interior mixes raw construction materials with a warmly colored mosaic floor.

Critic David Littlejohn has described Baker's work in *Architecture* magazine as "aggressively architectural," and it's this quality that's responsible for "upping" the design profile of the stretch of town that might have otherwise continued on its way toward stylistic ignominy. Merchants along Telegraph have, in recent years, steadily upgraded their storefronts in a manner that adjusts to the Baker language - that of high-visibility design. Says Sandy Boyd, proprietor of Espresso Roma and Café Milano, "David definitely deserves credit for teaching neighborhood shopkeepers the value of architecture to a business.

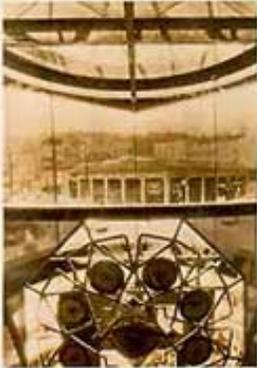
"Baker's buildings tend to be, in his own words, "out there, in your face, dramatic, loud," which, along with the sheer volume of his work in the city, explains why their presence is so noticeable and his style so easily recognizable. Since Baker moved his practice to San Francisco four years ago, he hasn't built as much in Berkeley, but the young 10-person firm, with an average age of 32, is busy working on a range of projects all around the Bay Area, including affordable multifamily housing, commercial office and retail space, luxurious custom homes, and renovated live/work loft apartment buildings. These have earned David Baker Associates much attention of late.

Their loaded monikers and offbeat stylizing aside, the homes are actually rather conventional programmatically and structurally. "I don't intend to revolutionize the way families live," says Baker, although the firm does like to "script" each house; no matter how arbitrary the narrative might be, the project's name and details derive from it. For example, Baker explains that the Revenge of the Stuccoids house, with its Fifties shlockiness, is a reaction to "the stucco bungalows marching up the Berkeley hills and attacking the Maybecks." (Bernard Ralph Maybeck practiced architecture in and around Berkeley and Oakland in the early 1900s, dotting the hills with his heavy-browed brown shingle houses. Drawing on elements from Romanesque, Gothic, Byzantine, and Japanese architecture, his fanciful if bizarre amalgams resulted in a "new" architecture that was highly influential throughout California.)

From the street, Baker's building appears to be a stucco house crashing into the hill; but the hill-facing side of the home is actually a wooden front à la Maybeck. "Designing from a script, taking the story down to the smallest details, makes the work richer," says Baker. However, he adds, "you don't necessarily need to know the story to appreciate the work."

Unsurprisingly, the down-to-earth architect, whose premature gray hair belies his nose-thumbing, rebellious nature, considers intellectualizing about architecture a limited endeavor. "Architects take themselves too seriously. Theory is a subset of the building, but other things happen in it too. We do everything in buildings,

By designing funky, often outrageous buildings and using local artisans to construct them, San Francisco architect David Baker has given fresh expression to the Bay Area spirit. by Cathy Lang Ho, photos by Beatriz Coll



Small text block, likely a continuation of the article or a caption for the images.

so, admittedly, there has to be a seriousness to architecture, and buildings that have no theory at all are ultimately confused. But are we so repressed that we can't stand a bit of excitement or richness here and there?" asks Baker. "Buildings are continually edited down to a small subset of what they could have been or done."

Pragmatism plus pranksterism, it seems, is Baker's preferred approach. "Anyone can come up with a rational solution to an architectural problem. But you come to a certain point where you have to make gut decisions, and no theory will help you do that," he says, explaining why he so values the irrational, visceral side of the building process. "Theory, style, and narrative are tools, not ends."

His sympathies were perhaps influenced by the quirky motifs of his Fifties childhood and the fanciful forms that pervaded the Arts & Architecture magazines piled high around his home, itself an architectural experiment. His father, a self-trained architect, was so moved by Frank Lloyd Wright's autobiography that he relocated his family from Michigan to Arizona, where Wright had established his Taliesin West studio and school, and built a solar adobe house inspired by the famous Case Study houses of the time. (Arts & Architecture reneged on its decision to publish it when they discovered that Baker Sr. was not a licensed architect.) From his first set of drafting triangles at age five, Baker's fate was cemented.

In 1971 he hitched his way to Berkeley, arriving on Telegraph with a backpack. Like most people living there at the time, he was a left-leaning, public-minded idealist, "one step away from being a bomb-throwing hippie." He enrolled in the University of California's architecture program in 1974, and in 1978, his last year, he and two friends entered a state-sponsored competition for energy-efficient, affordable housing, which they won. The multifamily project was built in Sacramento, and, as often happens, the first project led to similar ones. Their affordable housing and energy consultancy, Sol-Arc, was born. Baker is self-effacing about his early success: "People didn't hire us because they liked our architecture; they hired us because of our budget."

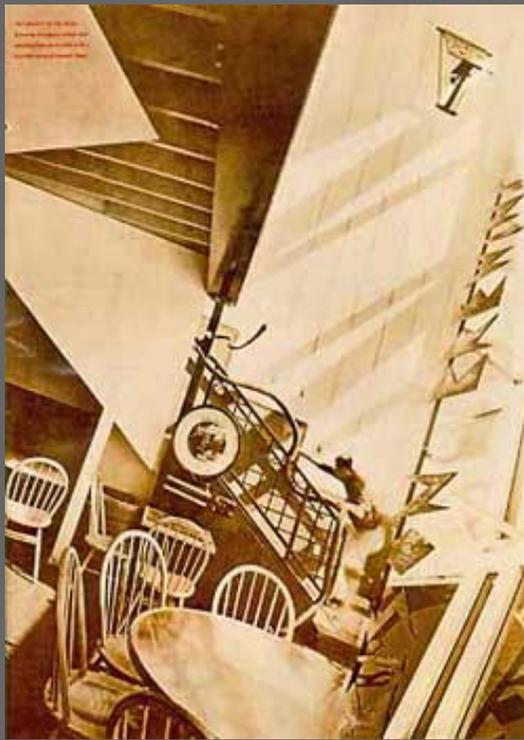
But Baker wanted to build rather than "do research and write reports," so in 1982, he broke out on his own. Over the years, various architectural associations and publications have applauded his low-income housing projects, which possess a level of detail unusual for most bare-bones developments.

It was Baker's ability to build well, efficiently, and cheaply that attracted the attention of Rick Holliday, then a partner with the nonprofit housing developer BRIDGE Corporation, which subsequently commissioned Baker to design the much-lauded affordable housing projects Holloway Terrace (1985) and Park View Commons (1990), both in San Francisco. Park View Commons, comprised of understated wood-frame cottages with projecting bays and red tile roofs and linked by well-used courtyards and pathways, was awarded first place in the American Institute of Architect's San Francisco 1991 design



Fanciful and drama-bent, Baker's work is a sort of high-style, fragmented form of Post-Modernism that showcases the architect's penchant for mixing references, shapes, and surfaces.

Fanciful and drama-bent, Baker's work is a sort of high-style, fragmented form of Post-Modernism that showcases the architect's penchant for mixing references, shapes, and surfaces.



excellence competition.

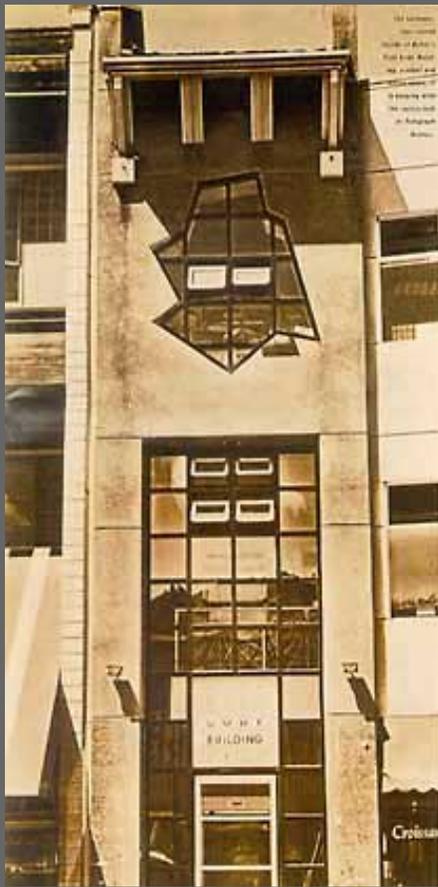
In 1988 Holliday launched his own company, McKenzie, Rose & Holliday, by converting a former liquor-storage warehouse into live/work loft apartments that he hired Baker to design, on Fourth Street in San Francisco's South of Market district. SOMA, as it is known, is a warehouse wasteland that has been gentrified over the last 15 years with hip clubs, trendy restaurants, and more designers and architects per square foot than any other neighborhood in the city. With the construction of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (by Mario Botta) and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (with buildings by James Stewart Polshek and Fumihiko Maki, and an esplanade by Romaldo Giurgola) within its perimeters, the SOMA district promises to be the city's new cultural center.

Baker moved his practice to San Francisco the same year that Holliday launched his company, and, sharing an office, the architect and developer embarked on a partnership that has resulted in another live/work project, the recently completed Clocktower building (where Baker & Associates and Holliday's offices are presently located). A three-part building whose oldest section dates back to 1907 and whose eponymous tower was erected in 1920, the Clocktower was occupied by a printing firm until a decade ago. As was the case with the Fourth Street project, the exterior stucco shell of the Clocktower building was left more or less intact, for reasons of budget as well as preservation. Inside, however, design flourishes abound, from a smooth, sinewy wooden handrail that leads visitors into the open courtyard to a sculptural stairwell and hand-wrought hall sconces. There are 47 different plans among the 127 home/office units, lending more individuality to the spaces than most apartment buildings typically possess.

Holliday appreciates Baker's active involvement: "With many firms, principals might be busy getting the projects and then hand them off to another designer, but Dave likes to be an architect more than anything, and I like a lot of input." The Fourth Street units sold more briskly than anyone had anticipated, and, mere months after the Clocktower's completion in the fall of 1992, all but 36 of its 127 units - averaging between \$200,000 and \$300,000 - have been sold. Holliday and Baker are currently collaborating on two additional San Francisco live/work loft projects.

While most Clocktower owners fit the yuppie profile, they do cover a wide spectrum - ages run from twenty-something to retiree, and occupations include film editing, industrial design, law, and business management. "We transformed a building into a pedestrian district, creating a congenial, vital, personal piece of city where residents have a sense of belonging," says Baker. "There's a need for zoning that supports neighborhood stability such as this."

In contrast to the loft renovations in New York City during the Seventies, there is nothing bohemian or gradual about these conversions; they are polished packages taken to completion in 12 months' time. But what they lack in funkiness, they make up for in structural integrity. Says Baker, "There's something to be



said for not hearing your neighbors and for having heating." And, given the cost required to make raw industrial space livable, a developer's intervention is not entirely unwelcome.

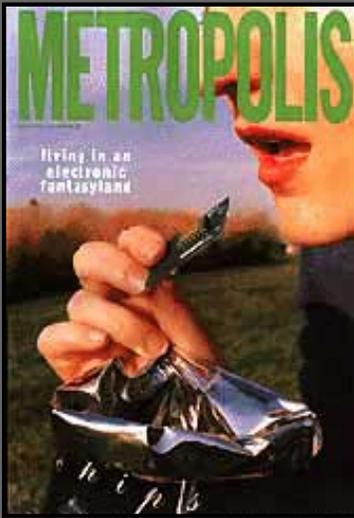
Geared as they are to a successful white-collar crowd, the Baker/Holliday lofts not only have multipaned windows and central heating, they are also accented with custom furnishings and fixtures. As Baker routinely does with other projects, commercial and residential, he brought in Bay Area artisans to contribute their expertise in wood, metal, concrete, mosaic, and furniture design, to give it "more creative horsepower." Says Baker, "It's more interesting and it isn't more expensive."

It also reflects the strong Arts and Crafts tradition and wealth of artisan talent in the Bay Area, on which many local architects regularly draw. Such collaboration has historically yielded a unique regional style, but one that's difficult to characterize - except perhaps for its high level of detail - because it's continually evolving and as variegated as the individual craftspeople themselves. But what makes Baker's architecture so typical is the premium he places on diversity. He is, in a sense, continuing the tradition of radical architecture for which Maybeck was both lauded and loathed a century ago.

Baker's achievement lies not so much in his architectural style as in his versatility. With budgets both paltry and ample, David Baker Associates manages to impart to all its projects an admirable - and appropriate - attention to detail and level of stylishness. A comparison between the staid low-income housing project, Park View Commons, and the whimsical church addition, Hodgkin Hall, reveals that Baker, for all his outlandish inclinations, ultimately responds well to the program he is given.

Perhaps his greatest talent is his masterful ability to navigate the straits of local zoning laws (especially treacherous in civically overactive Berkeley, where public hearings are held for just about everything) and his adroitness in steering developers, clients, and magazine editors in his direction. An adept promoter who routinely sends out large mailings of extra-glossy postcards depicting his latest work, Baker has won himself a strong and consistent client base that has enabled his regional vocabulary to expand and mature.

Asking whether or not Baker's work would hold any appeal outside the Bay Area elicits a pensive - but refreshingly genuine and humble - response: "It's terrifying to get bigger commissions," he admits. "But it's a matter of having enough time to get a strong feel for other areas - it's like learning languages. And people who know lots of languages find it easy to learn more languages. But it is possible. It just takes time." ■



Visit the home site of

METROPOLIS

the magazine of architecture, design, and social comment.

Cathy Lang Ho is the managing editor of **Design Book Review**, a quarterly journal published by MIT Press.

read [support your local artisan](#), a related article in metropolis magazine.