

Meet David Baker, FAIA



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David Baker was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on December 20, 1949. David Baker has received many awards over the course of his career. In 1996 he was selected as a fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

He is the founder of David Baker + Partners, Architects, a San Francisco based firm known for “combining social concern with a signature design character.”

Mr. Baker was principal of Sol-Arc, a firm dedicated to energy efficient architecture from 1977 to 1982.

He was a union carpenter before becoming an architect.

Editor: What was your childhood like?

DB: Great, I spent summers sailing on a lake in Michigan, winters trapping scorpions in Arizona.

Editor: Where did you go to school?

DB: Phillips Exeter Academy, Thomas Jefferson College, University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley

Editor: What kind of student were you?

DB: I was always a good student. Except for when I almost failed out of high school calculus. It was because all my energy went into my architecture and art classes. Also, when I went to college and dropped out in a messy and unplanned fashion.

Editor: What were you like as a young man?

DB: I was what the cool kids at Exeter called a “flyer”, which was really not a cool kid. And I was short!

Editor: What made you want to be an architect? What are some great influences in your life?

DB: My dad, Bernard Baker, was this really eclectic, incredible guy. He dropped out of high school because he had to ride 10 miles through the

snow on a horse to get there, so he was completely self-educated. He designed and built a rammed-earth solar house in Arizona in 1949, which I grew up in. He figured out at some point to work smarter, not harder, and from then on he didn't work more than a couple days per week. But, he was interested in more things than most people I've known. He liked astronomy and sculpture and founded a nature preserve for Sand Hill cranes. When I was about eight years old, he gave me a set of books about famous architects, which I still have, and from that point on I've never wanted to be anything but an architect.

Editor: Who did you work for after you graduated from college?

DB: I was an energy consultant with ELS, but it was a partnership with my own firm, Sol-Arc, which developed from collaboration on an award-winning solar office building in a competition in 1974.

Editor: What made you decide to go on your own?

DB: I didn't intend to, but I had a really great opportunity that was too good to pass up.

Editor: What is your philosophy of practicing architecture?

DB: I think of it as a combination of working to solve specific issues within certain parameters with a chance to put things together in a way that they haven't been put together before and push the envelope.

Editor: Who is your favorite architect?

DB: Corbusier

Editor: Who is your favorite artist?

DB: Picasso

Editor: Who is your favorite musician?

DB: Yo-Yo Ma

Editor: What is your favorite book?

DB: *Collapse*, by Jared Diamond

Editor: Any teachers that influenced you?

DB: Joe Esherick at Cal.

Editor: Any books that helped/influenced you?

DB: Gravity's Rainbow, by Thomas Pynchon

Editor: Do you have any heroes/any role models?

DB: My dad.

Editor: Was there anything in your life that you had to overcome?

DB: My life is more or less completely blessed.

Editor: What does it take to be an architect?

DB: Resilience.

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Editor: What inspires an architectural design—what goes through your mind?

DB: I don't think architectural designs are inspired, though there are moments of inspiration, of epiphany, within the process. Architecture is not a fine art form. You just figure it out and you strive for the practical and sublime.

Editor: Do you spend a lot of time at the studio (evenings, weekends)? Do you work alone?

DB: No, but I did when I was young and foolish. I rarely work alone: I think architecture is collaborative by nature.

Editor: How does it make you feel to see your designs become reality?

DB: The chief benefit of being an architect is that you get to realize these big things that are semi permanent—more permanent than dinner, less permanent than the sun.

Editor: Have you had any disappointments?

DB: None to speak of, though I'm constantly dissatisfied.

Editor: Do you have a favorite among your designs?

DB: I tend to always like the most recent work—I get very excited about the issues that are current for me.

Editor: Do you take aesthetics into account? Function? What is more important to you in designing a building?

DB: They're all parameters that you take into consideration. They're not necessarily mutually exclusive. You can consider function aesthetically, and you can consider aesthetics practically.

Editor: How did you manage the recession of the late 80s/early90s?

DB: We did affordable housing, and affordable housing did quite well during that recession.

Editor: Is there anything you wish you never did?

DB: No, I have no regrets.

Editor: What are your thoughts about the role of the architect in society?

DB: Architects have an incredible opportunity to think outside the property line and be proactive in urban design, social justice, and global warming issues.

Editor: Would you recommend becoming an architect to a young person?

DB: Yes. It's sometimes exhausting, but never boring.

Editor: In the matters of the community and the environment - do you think architects are as involved as they should be?

DB: No. There are a lot of activist architects, but we are in a unique position in the center of urban life. This gives us incredible access to effect solutions and move things forward. I think this should be an absolute priority for architects.

Editor: Would you do it all over again?

DB: Of course.

Editor: What are your hobbies?

DB: Cycling, travel, painting, knitting, gardening.

Editor: What do you think our prevalent style of architecture is?

DB: Late-Modernism is ascendant right now. Style is interesting and necessary but not very important.

Editor: What's the greatest challenge of our industry?

DB: Global warming.

Editor: Thank you Mr. Baker, It's been a privilege.

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