

## support your local artisan

by cathy lang ho  
photos by beatriz coll

metropolis magazine  
july/august, 1993. pp. 51



*Entry staircase designed by Jeff and Larissa Sands*



*Clocktower main entrance. Door and railings designed by Paco Prieto*

Woodworkers, mural painters, metal smiths, steel fabricators, and furniture designers are among the artisans architect David Baker often employs on his Bay Area projects. His enthusiasm for working with craftspeople may be best seen at San Francisco's Clock Tower, an early twentieth century industrial building Baker's firm recently converted to house 127 new lofts. The project possesses a sort of refined funkiness -- it has the artful idiosyncrasy generally associated with lofts, but none of their grittiness; nor does it have the padded hotel quality of its close cousin, the condo. The architect's attention to well-made and unique details extends to the least and most public areas alike.

Every bathroom has a concrete counter that Baker commissioned Buddy Rhodes to create. In his signature style, Rhodes individually cast each counter, sculpting the inexpensive and easy-to-work-with material to effect the look of stone. With a warm, earthy palette of olive, green-gray, rust, and sand, the integrally colored concrete is hand-packed and, when dry, layers of differently colored cement paste are applied to even out the surface, which is then sanded and sealed; the process produces surprisingly tactile results.

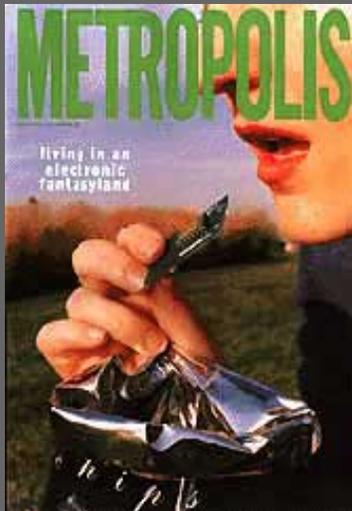
In addition to fabricating the building's imposing entry doors and sensuous railings, woodworker Paco Prieto also made several fixtures in individual lofts. In one kitchen, for instance, he interpreted a design by Rita Burgess, a Baker associate, of a pie-slice-shaped kitchen island that sports a curving, elevated bar top on the side facing the living room. Though he himself leans toward simplicity, Prieto marvels at Baker's ability to blend "craftspeople's expertise into this own palette" -- in the process, managing to extract contributions that are compatible with his architecture's flamboyant tendencies.

The Clock Tower's public spaces are dominated by zigzagging steel staircases. These are the work of Jeff and Larissa Sands, whose designs are meant to echo the materials and processes of the old building. They employed turn-of-the-century methods of metal fabrication, using tin or bolt connections instead of modern-day welding. Says Jeff Sands, "Often the war things work with David is that he'll come to us and ask us to fill into the blanks. 'What can we design with so much money?' he asks. But amazingly, he still makes it possible for some pretty experimental



Detail of entrance railing and doors  
designed by Paco Prieto

click on images to view higher resolution versions.



things to happen."

Prieto concurs: "David will say, 'Design a table for this space,' which is a pretty rare thing for an architect to say. And he does this not out of laziness, but out of respect for artisans." He adds that Baker is widely appreciated among local artisans for bringing in "good but unknown people and giving them a chance to get some frontline exposure. And David seems to enjoy working with craftspeople as much as he enjoys making sure that they get credit for their work. There are those of us who aren't interested in promoting ourselves as artisans -- we aren't represented by galleries -- so we are considered as 'job shops,' where architects come and we'll build whatever they give us. But someone like David is great for those of us who strive to be something more." ■

read [learning the language](#), a related article in metropolis magazine.

Visit the home site of  
**METROPOLIS**

*the magazine of architecture, design, and social comment.*