

Changing construction scene

DAVID BAKER SEES MODULAR HOUSING AS INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT

David Baker is one of the Bay Area's most prolific architects, designing over 10,000 homes over 35 years. He has worked on dozens of affordable housing and market-rate buildings, boutique hotels in Healdsburg and retail projects. His firm recently designed modular buildings in Union City and Oakland, using prefabricated sections assembled in a factory and shipped to the site, cutting costs and time. Baker talked to the Business Times about challenges for affordable housing and why he doesn't want his firm to grow too much.

How did you get into architecture? My father read the autobiography of Frank Lloyd Wright. He started building passive solar houses. I was born in one of them. He got me to read about architecture, so I really wanted to be an architect when I was 5.

What makes architecture appealing? It requires an immense amount of constant learning. It goes all the way from super technical stuff to convincing neighbors to let you build something. Those are skills that are really different. It all comes under architecture.

What were your first projects? We did an energy efficiency office building, and we founded a firm right out of school. I was based in Berkeley and it was an energy consulting firm. We were ~~torn~~ because we were consultants to architects. I really want to do buildings. Eventually I spun off. We did a lot of cafes. I entered a competition to design housing in Sacramento. We won and so we built these apartments in the early 80s. It was very energy efficient in the city center.

How did you transition to also design affordable housing? (Developer) Rick Holliday teamed up with Don Turner and there was a change in funding to nonprofits building affordable housing. Rick and Don started Bridge Housing and wanted somebody with a market-rate design approach. We did Bridge's first new affordable housing project, Park View Terrace, which is out there by Kezar Stadium. It's still there.

What are some reasons it costs so much – sometimes more than \$600,000 – to build one affordable housing unit? There isn't enough housing that meets the criteria of construction workers. And so people are coming from great distances. We also had the global financial crisis where a lot of people ceased being construction workers in other places or went out of business. So it's really stressed the construction industry. The other thing about nonprofits is they basically never sell the property. They're really institutional buildings. It makes sense to install, say, locks that last 30 years.

What's your design approach? To build community with high-density urban housing. People are really concerned about density. Yet there's actually more social interaction in cities than in a lot of rural environments where they just don't spend a lot of time hanging out with their neighbors. (The firm has nine design principles that include connecting buildings to the urban fabric, using bold building shapes, and activating the ground floor.)

Are you happy with your firm's size? It's great to have these gigantic firms. But it's hard for them to be as quirky

and interesting. There's a place for them. My personal feeling is once you go beyond your 30s (in employees) it becomes much more corporate. Would I want to run a franchise with 10,000 restaurants or something smaller where you have control over it? You can be quick and you can have a real dialogue that builds over time. I'm not dissing the big firms.

What prompted you to get into modular housing? I'm the chief design officer of (Rick Holliday's) FactoryOS. They're moving ahead at their factory in Vallejo to build a mock-up unit for affordable housing. It's union-made. It meets American code. It's tremendously important. There's areas in places like Sweden and Japan where the industry has changed and that's basically the way they're doing it. The idea of very old-school construction where you have to craft a building by hand isn't appropriate for all construction.

– Roland Li



TODD JOHNSON