



HOME

& Garden



Photo by MURPHY KIRREY

Refining that Berkeley look

Architect David Trachtenberg's projects adapt to the times but are inspired by the Bay Region style

By Eve Kushner
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

What do Berkeley Bowl, the Rose Grocery project and the new Read Building on Fourth Street have in common? Their architect is David Trachtenberg, known for responding to the historical feel of Berkeley architecture while creating structures with a distinctive look.

His architectural forebears include Bernard Maybeck and Julia Morgan, founders of the Bay Region style of architecture, which emphasized building with natural

materials and featured rooms that interacted with the outdoors. But he also brings a contemporary sensibility to his work and bridges the gap between past and present — sometimes in a single building.

One example is the Rose Grocery project. Constructed in 1908, the building housing the store sported a Mission Revival parapet and facade. Although severely dilapidated, it had been granted landmark status, which put Trachtenberg in a tight spot: He was unable to salvage the wreck yet for-

look of Berkeley with commercial buildings such as Saul's Restaurant & Delicatessen, the former Cody's Books on Fourth Street, and the mixed-use building that houses La Farine bakery on Solano Avenue.

Berkeley architect David Snippen said, "What Trachtenberg has contributed to Berkeley is a legacy of very fine architecture that hopefully will be understood and admired for a long time. It's added a lot to the cultural inventory." A member of the city's Design Review Committee, Snippen adds, "When we see him come in with a project, we take a breath and relax."

According to Snippen, the committee was "knocked out" on seeing the drawings for the elaborate new mixed-use Read Building on Fourth Street, south of University Avenue: "We thought, 'This is what architecture in town ought to be, instead of junk that you get off the shelf and out of a cardboard box.' It's a pleasure to see somebody spend attention and really understand what goes together and how."

Today, many architects aim to design projects in Beijing and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, but Trachtenberg finds globe-trotting "inherently suspect, because it creates a world where everything's the same. You have to learn about the local conditions, culture, climate and building conditions. I've made conscious decisions to stay local."

That choice stems partly from Trachtenberg's passion for this area: "I've tried to understand the special quality that emanates from the ground here — a kind of earthiness, simplicity and honesty." Delighting in those qualities and in the region's natural beauty, he said, "You don't have to try so hard to create this miraculous object when you've got this miraculous landscape."

Trachtenberg cites as an influence
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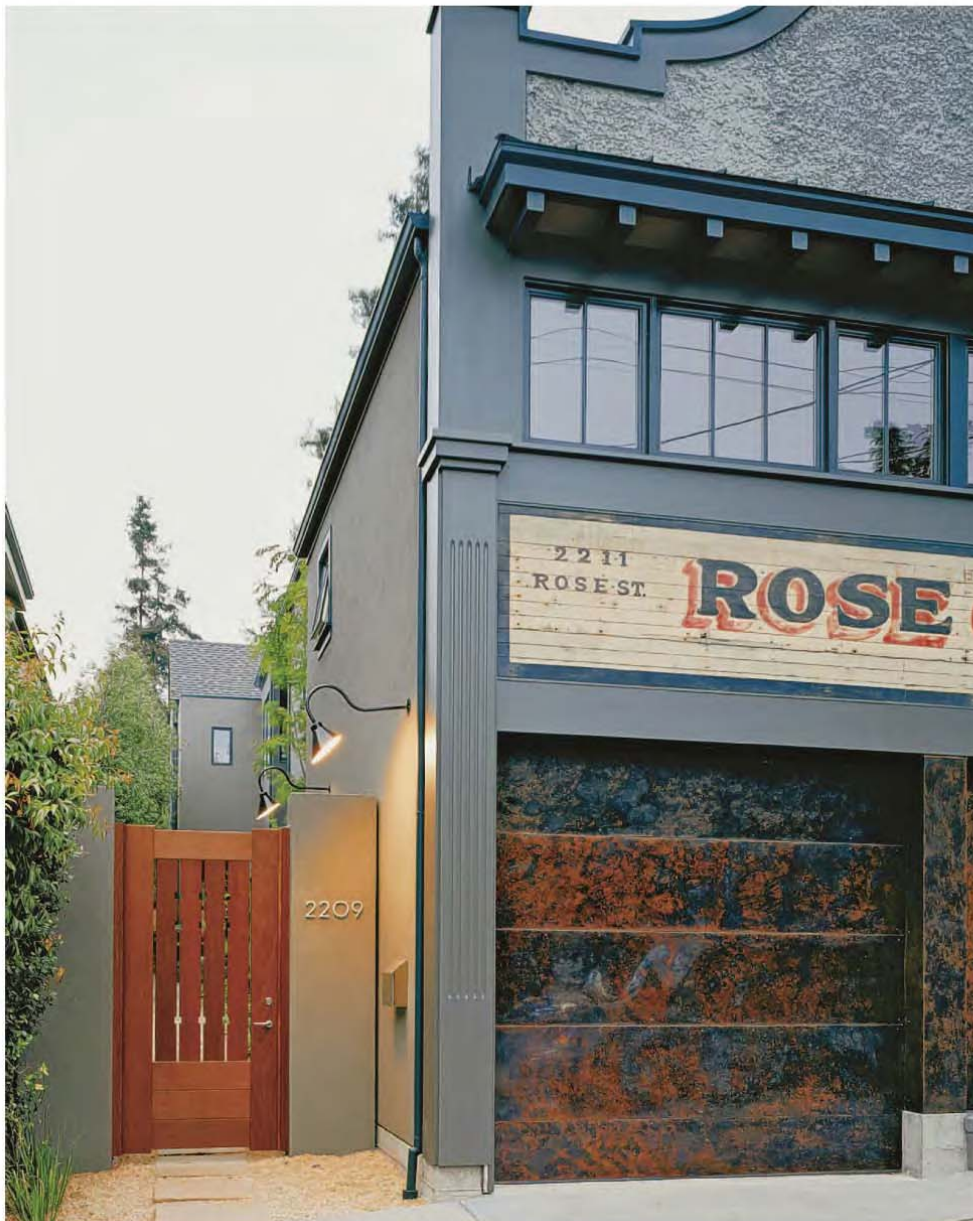
"We thought, 'This is what architecture in town ought to be, instead of junk that you get off the shelf and out of a cardboard box.'"

DAVID SNIPPEN, Berkeley architect

bidden to alter its appearance too much. But he realized he could get clearance to demolish the building as long as he re-created its facade.

Trachtenberg, 50, grew up in Pittsburgh as a triplet in a family with five children. He received a bachelor's degree in architecture from UC Berkeley before earning a master's degree in architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

He lives in a century-old Berkeley brown shingle house and has run Trachtenberg Architects in the same city since 1991. Robert Nishimori, the other principal, and project architects Isaiah Stackhouse and Neven Krickovich work there with him. Examples of the firm's residential and commercial work can be found from Petaluma to San Jose, including several San Francisco projects. But Trachtenberg's primary accomplishment is helping to shape the



Berkeley Bowl market, top, and the Rose Grocery project townhouses, above and left, were designed by David Trachtenberg. The Rose Grocery project turned a former dilapidated store into sleek townhouses by cleverly re-creating the facade (above) and adding a courtyard (left).

David Trachtenberg projects in Berkeley



Saul's Restaurant & Delicatessen evokes a taste of Manhattan on Shattuck Avenue.



The MiG office, an environmental design firm, is a former animal lab.



Berkeley's Design Review Committee was reportedly "knocked out" by Trachtenberg's plans for the elaborate mixed-use Read Building.



A former warehouse is now offices for the design firm Addis Creson.

Architect likes to treat the outdoors as just another room

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ence "The Simple Home," a book written in 1904 by Charles Keeler, a colleague of Maybeck's. It lays out many of the ideas that shaped Berkeley architecture — and that shaped Trachtenberg. He recites his favorite sentence from the book's introduction: "Hillside architecture is landscape gardening around a few rooms in case of rain."

He rejects what he calls an American tendency to build houses as isolated objects dotting the landscape and instead embraces the way buildings and streets clearly carve out courtyards and piazzas in the rest of the world. A courtyard isn't just a void: "You've got to shape the outdoor space like you would a room." And he adds: "Courtyards are one of the things that really rock my boat."

After the firestorm

After Bill and Karen McClung lost their Berkeley house in the 1991 fire, they hired Trachtenberg to build something different on the same lot. Bill McClung notes, "Old Berkeley is what we had in our minds." In particular, they wanted to emulate the stucco Faculty Club on the UC Berkeley campus. They also thought it was essential to make the house feel connected to the outdoors. Trachtenberg wrapped common areas of the house around a courtyard — treating it as an outdoor room.

The house also features a sleeping porch illuminated only by candlelight, as well as abundant windows and French doors, all of which enhance the sense of an indoor-outdoor connection.

Even the living room fireplace contributes to this feeling. The couple wanted to "live pretty close to the ground," as Trachtenberg puts it, and to have "fire right on the floor, rather than a hole in the wall or a hearth. It feels more like a campfire and more primal when it's right on the floor."

Their living room floor also has primal qualities, expressing a deep earthiness. Trachtenberg scored the concrete with a large diamond pattern, thereby lending scale to the room, giving the concrete guidance on where to crack (as it inevitably does) and making



Bill and Karen McClung hired Trachtenberg to build this home on the hilly site of the house they lost in the 1991 fire.

the floor resemble big stones. An acid-based stain impregnated the concrete, creating a raku-like glazing and a rich mix of colors ranging from emerald green to earthen brown.

Trachtenberg, who tends to be soft-spoken, comes to life on the subject of materials and their textures. In his own home, he encourages visitors to touch one silky smooth interior wall. "Over here's the best part," he said, grinning as he caresses the plaster.

"One of the secrets of old buildings is they have a very limited materials palette," Trachtenberg said. "Any old, indigenous building has what's locally available. They had one kind of stone and a couple kinds of trees they could use, and maybe somebody made a clay tile." In charming old places,

such as Italian hill towns, people unconsciously sense and appreciate the "rightness of the buildings," primarily because of their limited palettes, Trachtenberg said. In houses built today, he said, materials from India, China and Kansas are used, creating an unworkable hodgepodge.

At the McClung house, Trachtenberg used copper, slate, stucco, redwood and concrete repeatedly in different ways. "If you have a great palette to start with, that's half the battle," he said.

The McClung stucco is a point of pride and passion. "Most stucco has colorless sand and pigment that sits right at the surface, so it's very flat. Almost any stucco you look at, it's absolutely dead." Looking at the McClung exterior wall, he said, "What's beautiful about this is it changes. This is a

real material. It's alive. See how this twinkles in the light? What you're looking at is not a pigment. It's just the sand and the raw stucco." Trachtenberg brought the sand to the surface with a hard-steel-trowel finish and muriatic acid, which removed a creamy layer from the stucco. This acid process is like a "time accelerator," Trachtenberg said, that made the building immediately look 80 years old: "As soon as it was done, it looked as good to me as the Faculty Club."

Stuck on stucco

Maybe it's an architects' quirk, but Marin County architect Dave Deppen found himself unable to drive by the Read Building in west Berkeley without getting out to touch the stucco. "I was pulled toward the building in a visceral

way," Deppen said. "I just knew I wanted to run my hand along it." The gleaming, rich woods in Trachtenberg's projects similarly tempt the fingers. He trains homeowners to sand and oil these gleaming wooden creations, and the homeowners eagerly tell him about their diligent upkeep.

"I think simplicity is a virtue," Trachtenberg said of his designs. "It's hard to make things simple. It's easy to make things complicated." He never worries about creating too simple or severe a space because "buildings are the stage on which lives are lived." Simply put, human lives fill out built spaces.

Trachtenberg said he's always had a knack for simplicity, but meditating regularly for seven years has afforded more clarity.

He's known for creating spaces

with a terrific sense of flow and pleasing proportions. His buildings feel inviting, and although that partly derives from his Bay Region predecessors, another key influence is Christopher Alexander (formerly of Berkeley and now in England), who wrote prolifically about the design process and produced many insights about why certain spaces feel right and even timeless.

"I've read everything he's written," Trachtenberg said, adding that he has internalized Alexander's principles. In fact, Trachtenberg got his start in Berkeley after "barging" into the offices of Denny Abrams and Rick Millikan, who jointly developed the commercial part of Fourth Street in Berkeley. Trachtenberg loved how Abrams and Millikan enacted Alexander's principles, so he insisted on working for these developers, although they had no vacant position.

Alexander's ideas influenced the designs of both the McClung house and the Kahn house in Berkeley. In fact, after Trachtenberg introduced Liz and Stephen Kahn to Alexander's seminal work, "A Pattern Language," they bought separate copies so they could each mark inspiring passages.

Liz Kahn, an artist with an eye for color, responds deeply to Trachtenberg's work. She said that because he's an accomplished artist from a family of artists and landscape architects, he's very attuned to his surroundings and can create places that feel wonderful. Stephen Kahn recalls that during the design process, Trachtenberg kept asking the couple, "What would encourage you to stop and be still in this space and sit and read, or sit and have a conversation?"

Trachtenberg said his favorite buildings are European cathedrals that "explicitly go for the spiritual jugular," so perhaps it's not surprising that his buildings affect people profoundly. "I think architecture clearly speaks to the soul and is the mirror of the soul," he said. "A great building, just like a work of music or a painting, has the capacity to move us emotionally."

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