

THE DAILY RECORD

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A look at the work of artist and architect George Edward Baker

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Architect George Edward Baker has been creating unique structures Upstate for more than 20 years.

He is known for building conversions and said recently he feels his creativity is only improving with age.

Baker's specialty of converting old barns and railroad stations into lavish homes began with his own in 1985 when he decided to move out of the city of Rochester and relocate somewhere between Pittsford and Canandaigua.

"I went driving around with my two daughters in the middle of winter and we came across this old barn and they had never been inside one before so we went inside and they jumped in the hay and told me they wanted live there," Baker said.

Baker said he laughed the idea off and told his daughters they couldn't live in a barn.

"My daughter, Heather, who was nine at the time, said 'Daddy, come on. You're an architect, you can do it.' So within a few days, I bought the barn," he said.

Word of his work spread, which led him to convert more homes. Baker designed a home that simulated a 1800s-era New York Central Railroad

station for clients who were great station admirers.

"That's how you end up specializing, I think, even if you don't want to, you get a reputation for doing certain things. It's a lot of fun because it really gives you a chance to continue to be creative and that's really what keeps me being an architect — the creativity behind projects," Baker said.

Baker's latest project is something he's never done before, which he said is the reason it peaked his interest. South of Geneva on West Lake Road, Baker is working with a client who is originally from the Loire Valley in France. She recently moved onto a 280-acre dairy farm that went out of business. She contacted Baker because she had old barns on her property that were falling apart and wanted an estimate on the refurbishing work.

When she realized how much it would cost to take care of the barns, she asked Baker for some advice. He recommended selling the property's north 40 acres overlooking Seneca Lake, building a road and several houses and selling off the lots.

After some brainstorming, Baker said the woman told him she always wanted to build an energy-efficient



COURTESY GEORGE E. BAKER

This 1860 railroad station was originally built by the Delaware - Lackawana & Western Railroad in Wallace, N.Y. It was moved to Victor, where it was securely remodeled and restored by Baker.

replication of the French countryside.

"We're going to build the kind of houses you see out in the middle of a grape field in France, the real deal. It's going to be a completely green design," Baker said.

The homes will be small but well done, and will be situated on larger lots. Baker and his client plan to develop grape vineyards throughout and around the homes so they appear as though they're in the middle of vineyard.

"We'll be using a variety of green technologies for the homes, including natural materials like stone and rock. We're going to heat and cool the homes with ground-source heat pumps," Baker explained.

The first thing Baker did to start the work was to study French country design.

"The first thing I noticed was there was very little wood used on these homes because there weren't a lot of trees, but they had a lot of rocks and cement, so a lot of the houses were

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stucco and stone," he said. "This may be the first house that I ever worked on that I won't buy any part of it at Home Depot or Lowes."

Baker will market the homes primarily to people in their 50s and older, empty nesters and professionals on the verge of retirement, or even those who spend their winters down south.

"We are looking for people who are refined enough to appreciate the beauty of the French countryside," Baker said. "We have one client already so we're going to design and build the first house and use it as a model to show other people and go from there."

The project is still in the planning phase, and Baker said it's likely to be a year or more before the houses will be built.

Baker is known in the architectural community as someone who can solve unsolvable design problems, but he said he can't explain his process.

"If I could say, I would write a book and retire. It's very hard to explain creativity," he said.

Baker said he always thinks his best project will be the next one, or the one

he's currently working on.

"Nothing brings that to light more than when someone calls me and tells me that I did a project for them 15



COURTESY GEORGE E. BAKER

This home is located in Victor. Baker designed this home for clients who were fans of Frank Lloyd Wright's "prairie style."

years ago and I go up in my files and find their drawings and I'll look at it and suddenly I remember everything about the project. I remember their kids and the dog's name, just by looking at the drawing," he said. "And then I'll look at it again and I'll think I would not have solved that this way and that's when I realize how much I've learned. It's like a reflection, like looking in a mirror or something. It's a great way to see your own progress."

Baker recently reflected on how his process has changed through the years.

"When I was younger, I would get very excited and I would come home and start designing right away, and I don't do that any more," he said.

When Baker gets a new client, he meets with them several times, visits the site and thinks about their house and where they live. Often he'll take a week just to think.

"I'll get the project designed in my head next and then I'll tell the client about it and there it sits. I'll tell them my solution and describe it and they get very excited," Baker said. "After that is when I go draw it, and so I show up a few days later and they've already heard what it's going to be like, but they

haven't seen it. When they do, they're so excited because now they can visualize what's been going on in their head."

Baker said he has always considered design architects to be artists: "To be a true designer you have to be able to see the big picture, all the piece that the clients and engineers can't see, and pull together a unique solution that solves all the problems, fits the budget and looks dynamite."