



Rising From the Rubble

Architect David Trachtenberg transforms a derelict grocery store into condominiums that both preserve the past and embrace the future — by Joan Chatfield-Taylor

Given the choice, most architects would probably prefer to design an all-new building on a spacious lot, rather than negotiate with historic preservation devotees and contentious zoning boards.



“I like the difficult sites—the sites no one wants to build on,” Trachtenberg says. “The more constraints, the better. That’s where the opportunities are for architecture and development.”

Hunrick Grocery 1908



Not Berkeley architect David Trachtenberg. “I like the difficult sites—the sites no one wants to build on,” he says. “The more constraints, the better. That’s where the opportunities are for architecture and development.”

In the spirit of adaptive reuse, he transformed an abandoned Safeway store into the gleaming Berkeley Bowl, turned an animal-testing laboratory into dynamic offices, and gave a truck depot new life as an advertising agency.

The saga of his latest re-imagining starts with an abandoned grocery store in north Berkeley. Built in 1908 by a German immigrant, Hunrick Grocery closed down in 1966. In 1988, it was named a structure of merit by the landmarks commission, but the owner allowed the building to molder.

“Everybody tried to buy the site, but it never worked out,” Trachtenberg says. “I think some developers tried to do too much, and the neighbors objected.” He bought the property after the owner’s death in 2004, but by then, more than half the building had collapsed behind its façade.

Intent on preserving the building’s spirit, Trachtenberg wanted to create a project that would also be sensitive to both



PHOTOGRAPHY: (TOP) MUFFY KIBBEY; (BOTTOM) BERKELEY ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

the residential scale and the history of the neighborhood.

The result is two condominiums tucked behind a garage that retains the Mission Revival form of the original façade, as well as the grocery’s fading sign. Because the façade was considered worthy of preservation, Trachtenberg did not have to create the 20-foot setback currently required in Berkeley. This allowed him space for a courtyard garden, sheltered from the street, which links the front

condominium to the studio above the garage. The second condo has its own garden at the back of the lot. Each unit has its own entrance and is oriented in a different direction, so the occupants have the feel of living in separate homes.

That was important to the new owners. “We had always lived in single-family houses in the suburbs,” says resident Patricia Smith. However, she and her husband, Kermit, were ready for a change. As he explains, “We wanted to be



able to walk everywhere and be close to public transit.”

When they heard about the Rose Street condos, they flew in from New York, where they had been living, and purchased their unit on first sight.

Their enthusiasm was gratifying to Trachtenberg. “There’s a large part of the market that is turned off by what’s offered in the new-house market,” he says. “People want houses that are simple, solid, functional, and livable. They want to be able to exist without a car, and they want

connection to community and to history.”

Not only do the owners like the fading Rose Street Grocery sign on the front, they don’t even mind when some old-timer rings their bell in search of candy. The neighbors are happy with the project, which was unanimously approved by both the landmarks and zoning-variance commissions. The respectful reuse of the property garnered a bonus: It boasts the highest price per square foot in the city. As Trachtenberg notes, “Good design adds value.”