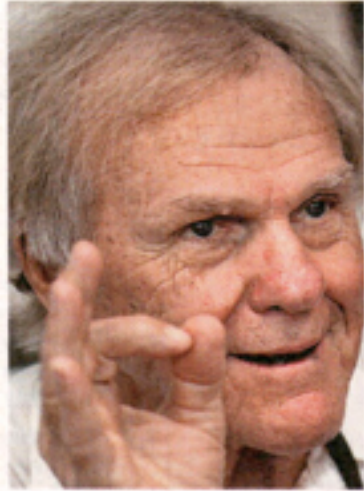


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Napa's go-to architect for understated drama



Brant Ward / The Chronicle

Howard Backen started in San Francisco before heading north to Napa Valley.

By John King
CHRONICLE URBAN DESIGN CRITIC

There is no obvious link between Futo winery above Napa Valley and the city block that houses the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco.

One makes Cabernet that sells for \$200 a bottle; the other is a halfway house that helps drug abusers and ex-convicts reclaim their lives. The winery's details are so meticulous that the corrugated metal siding on humbler buildings has a four-coat patina to blend with the reclaimed redwood that frames it. At Delancey Street, flowerboxes and peach stucco are the most elaborate moves to evoke the mood of an Italian village.

But the two sets of buildings have one thing in common: architect

Howard Backen.

In a career trajectory no novelist would plot, Backen has prospered by leaving his position as founding partner at a San Francisco firm that grew to 100 employees, and moving north, where he has resurfaced in the past decade as the architect of choice for what the Wine Spectator last year called "a select group of vintners who favor . . . discreet affluence over ostentation."

Onetime associates say the transition has an odd underlying logic – especially because the 74-year-old has an affinity for the farm buildings that still dot the outer Bay Area landscape, rather than castles or chateaus from who knows where.

An intuitive designer

"Howard is the strongest intuitive designer I've run across at picking up on the characteristic of a place," says William Leddy of the San Francisco firm Leddy Maytum Stacy, who began his career at the firm Backen Arrigoni Ross, now BAR. "He'd come to me with these sketches, literally on cocktail napkins sometimes, and they were so evocative."

But if Backen's work today draws on agricultural roots, his clientele is of different stock. Many of the North Bay wineries by his firm Backen Gillam & Kroeger are tucked out of sight behind security gates; he's designed homes for the likes of Jon Lasseter, Pixar's chief creative officer, and the president of the San Francisco 49ers during the team's glory days, Carmen Policy. An upcoming monograph on Backen's architecture is to have a foreword by actress Diane Keaton.

"He's such a charming guy, he could have clients eating out of his hand," Leddy points out. "He's very easygoing, classic southern Oregon, but he developed a very high level of sophistication."

The difference between Backen's wineries and others in Napa is that his aren't designed to make you gawk.

They're as theatrical as any built since Robert Mondavi opened the doors of his mock-Spanish mission in 1966 and put Napa Valley on the tourist map. But it's theater designed to make you feel

you've encountered some true agrarian culture, as though the structures of wood and local stone had been there all along.



Howard Backen designed Futo winery, which showcases his draw to agricultural roots.

Natural style

It's a natural style for someone who grew up in Roseburg, Ore., in a part of the state where wooden barns and metal sheds are was much a part of the rural landscape as cattle ranches and orchards.

"That aesthetic is what started what I do," says Backen, whose uncle in Montana was an architect. "It does what it has to do as simply as it can. There's an underlying geometry, but no gymnastics at all."

These traits are seen in one of Backen's more modest recent wineries: Larkmead Vineyards, which sits off Highway 29 near Calistoga. Its two buildings from a distance might be a well-kept farmhouse and barn, no obvious flourish or frill to be seen.

But the eaves that shade the porch extend 13 feet beyond the front wall of the tasting room – a prim space where the wall behind the serving counter is glass, the better to display the vines beyond. The "barn" conceals fermentation tanks and barrels of aging wine stacked four high, as well as the steel frame hidden behind the outer skin of wood painted white.

"You can't house wine in a simpler building than that," Backen says with satisfaction. "It's a well-insulated warehouse."

As he drives from winery to winery in his BMW 535i or strides up a slope to point out some building detail that no casual visitor will ever notice, Backen exudes a Western air.

What also comes out are Backen's good manners. When describing one recent project "that was not a lot of fun," you sense high fees were the lure rather than high art. Yet he tempers each anecdote with comments like "but that's all right. It's amazingly good for what it could have been."

Unlike Larkmead, an appointment-only facility where appointments are east to get, most of Backen's wineries are like Futo. They're hidden, off-limits unless you have an invitation, reached by roads no tour bus has ever traversed.

While the firm also does restaurants – Kokkari in San Francisco, Go Fish and others in the valley – and the occasional small resort, the wineries are why Money magazine in 2008 identified Backen as "Napa Valley's star architect." Architectural Digest this year placed him on the list of the world's 100 top architects.



All of which is a far cry from the work done in Backen's prior life, including the Delancey Street complex that faces the bay and continues to leave its mark on the lives of its 350 or so residents.

'Most rewarding project'

When Delancey Street Foundation President Mimi Silbert called on Backen to "be my pencil" in 1984, the firm he had started in 1966 with

Robert Arrigoni and Bruce Ross numbered roughly 100 employees.

It had started small, three University of Oregon alums drawn to 1960s San Francisco. “I wasn’t going to be an architect in Roseburg,” Backen says now.

The trio built a business with energetic modernism of an almost Cubist bent. As the firm grew, its buildings grew more eclectic, partly in response to changing styles and partly in response to the need to attract clients.

Those demands argued against a job like the one Silbert pitched, but also made it all the more intriguing. Instead of midlevel

executives looking to score points by trimming costs, the client would be an organization where, according to the Delancey Street website, “the average resident has been a hard-core drug and alcohol abuser, has been in prison, is unskilled, functionally illiterate, and has a personal history of violence and generations of poverty.”

“You couldn’t meet those guys and not take the job,” Backen recalls with a smile. “That design was all listening. There’d be 200 people in a meeting, and they all wanted something that looked like ‘home’.”

That’s not easy to do with a 336,700-square-foot facility at Brannan Street and the Embarcadero in what then was a remote redevelopment district. Many building materials were to be donated, so Backen and BAR left blueprint details vague. Another reason to simplify: more workers than not were Delancey Street trainees.

“The general contractor, he had learned by taking courses in San Quentin,” Backen says. “He was absolutely brilliant. He just had been in jail.”

Backen focused on watching out for the basics and keeping everyone grounded.

“Howard is the nicest man, and he never put on the ‘great architect’ act,” Silbert says. “I’d come up with some terrible idea, and he’d listen and then say, ‘That’s good, but let me show you some other things’.”

As Delancey Street prepared to open in 1989, it was hailed as “a masterpiece of contemporary social design” by The Chronicle’s then architecture critic, Allan Temko. The complex won awards for architecture and urban design from the American Institute of Architects. Backen still returns each year for the foundation’s seder.

“I love what’s there,” Backen says. “In a lot of ways, it’s by far the most rewarding project I’ve taken part in.”

Nothing left to chance

The satisfactions of Delancey Street, in their own way, nudged Backen to leave San Francisco for Napa. The way he tells it, BAR’s growth brought the dilemma faced by so many creative people in business: the effort of running a firm takes precedence over the creative muse.

“At BAR, I’d put on a coat and jacket and we’d go *interview*. It was like you’re a traveling salesman,” Backen says while sitting on the veranda of the house he nestled into a forested slope above Oakville for his wife of 18 years, Lori, and their daughter Annie, 16. A house where, as with the St. Helena office, there’s a framed photograph of architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

So when he was approached in 1994 to do a small winery by longtime associate Williams Harlan, Backen headed off on his own. The family moved north and Backen subleased space from an architectural draftsman in St. Helena.

“For sure I was encouraging him to come up,” say Harlan, who made millions in real estate before buying land above Oakville and launching Harlan Estate, as coveted a red wine as any you’ll (probably never) drink. “His passion is creating architecture, not managing a large firm.”

Backen now has designed three wineries for Harlan, his family compound and Harlan's club-like Napa Valley Reserve – a village-like cluster amid vineyards off the Silverado Trail, where the membership fee tops \$150,000.

The Harlan buildings show Backen's approach at its disciplined best; they're practical as well as polished, seemingly down-to-earth until you look close at details such as the inch-thick slats of redwood that screen the air-circulation vents at Harlan Estate. In the process, they make the case that Wine Country wineries needn't put on foreign airs.

"Having done Harlan was huge, because you get credibility right off," says Backen, whose firm has now had a hand in the design or remodeling of 40 wineries. "They (new clients) don't interview, they just call you. And they don't give any budgets."

Which leads to a situation today where Backen Gillam and Kroeger has 41 employees in offices in St. Helena and Sausalito.

"We are *extremely* busy," Backen admits. "I'm doing three homes in Aspen."