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Inside the wacky world of Dallas designer William Baker

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William Baker pulls up in front of an old stone cottage on a leafy street in East Oak Cliff. He acknowledges we're not in the hip part of town. "The neighborhood's not dangerous," says Baker, "it's just not Kessler Park."

The engine of his Honda Element is still running as he starts to climb out, then catches himself and kills the ignition. For the second time today.

Yes, the stylishly disheveled designer with the Paul Newman-blue eyes is distracted. Blame it on Baker's own brand of A.D.D.: Attention Deficit Design.

Baker is one-half of Jones Baker Interiors + Architecture, the boutique firm he co-founded 13 years ago with business partner J.B. Jones, a crew-cut pragmatist and Baker's polar opposite. The men have carved their niche designing interiors for clubs and restaurants. Close to home, there's Cru Wine Bar, Deep Ellum's Local, Bracket's at Hotel Palomar, Rusty Taco, even an ongoing El Fenix makeover. On the other side of the world, an in-progress Trader Vic's Dubai is one of 10 the team has done, including what Baker hears is "the hot-spot in Riyadh, even though you can't legally drink alcohol."

Baker's latest project is revealed when his iPhone suddenly plays a marimba — his ring-tone for clients — and bold-face Dallas restaurateur Patrick Colombo's name flashes onto the screen. "Hang on, I need to take this," Baker says, turning and walking toward the house until all we see is the back of his vintage Wrangler cowboy shirt and Ben Sherman jeans.

Baker hasn't actually lived in the Oak Cliff cottage since January. He bought the house in 1992, after graduating from the University of Texas at Austin and landing his first job at Dallas' Phillips-Ryburn Associates. He liked how Oak Cliff's meandering hills reminded him of Austin, so he worked foreclosure auctions for months, ultimately scoring the 1939 two-bedroom for \$9,500 cash.

Baker was a bargain shopper even at 26.

Today, the tiny front porch is piled high with old furniture, and a Buddha statue gleams atop a stack of wood type trays Baker got in trade for designing the South Side on Lamar home of Bill's Records and Tapes. Nestled in the grass is a weathered paneled door Baker found discarded on a curb and is here to eyeball one final time before repurposing it as a dining table for the downtown apartment he now calls home.

Baker dodges specifics on price, but swears he paid "fair market value" for the seventh-floor unit — bought at auction, sight unseen — in Main Street's distressed Metropolitan building.

In fact, we're only on Page One of Baker's impulse-real-estate portfolio. A few he cops to right up front; others he only acknowledges after we learn about them from other sources.

There's a house in Marfa, well, make that *two* houses, and a trailer park he hopes to rework into a modernist utopian compound. He also owns random decrepit lots around Dallas' Cedars neighborhood and more in Oak Cliff. When we press him for a once-and-for-all total, he struggles even to formulate a convincing guess. The downtown apartment represents something of a clean slate. "I just wanted to come home from long trips and crazy days and have a refuge where I didn't look around and go 'I need to fix that. I need to rewire that,'" Baker admits. The new apartment also serves as a personal gallery for his most beloved pieces, including a painting by Dallas Nine artist Otis Dozier, a Jens Risom chair and a sign designed to flash "Our God Reigns" in light bulbs, if ever Baker gets around to rewiring it.

Then there's that yardstick wall. The designer spent seven days methodically attaching all 1,000 with carpet tacks — progress documented by frequent Facebook posts. Indeed, Baker may be almost as addicted to social media as he is to flea markets, estates sales and late-night dinner runs. A few recent online check-ins: Neon Cowboy, Lee Harvey's, Club Schmitz.

If you detect a penchant for dive bars, blame Baker's best friend and "social studies" partner, Julie Webb (also known by her belly-dancing moniker, Ruby LaRouge). Webb and Baker became fast friends six years ago, when he consigned a Frank Jones drawing to the Waxahachie gallery she owns with her husband, Bruce.

"William designs beautiful, sleek lounges and restaurants, but that's not what naturally turns him on," Webb says. "He doesn't have tunnel vision when it comes to taste."

She claims they rarely go anywhere without someone commenting on Baker's intense blue eyes. "They melt people, they soften people. It's like they're hypnotic. ... He once made a trip to Istanbul and realized when he got there that he had forgotten to make hotel reservations. Can you imagine? I told him, 'Don't worry, you've got those eyes.'

More than anything, Baker has an eye for *stuff*. Every surface of the Oak Cliff house is piled high with vintage curiosities: Spaceship coin banks. Japanese fruit-and-vegetable-themed salt and pepper shakers. Tin pencil boxes. Typewriters. Obscure record albums. Carved naked-lady folk art.

He goes for large-scale items, too. See the kitchen's fully operational 1940s O'Keefe & Merritt stove (a Green Sheet find) and the mint green, 1960s Studebaker Lark parked behind the razor-wired chain-link fence of Jones-Baker's Cedars neighborhood office.

Baker accumulates so much merch in his travels — Canton, suburban antique malls, estate sales, a street market on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent — that he feeds two seemingly bottomless antiques booths (one at Dallas' Dolly Python, the other at Austin's Uncommon Objects) and regularly supplies finds to restaurant projects. Case in point: the beat-up tackle boxes and old lures he's been amassing for Shannon Wynne's new Arlington Flying Fish.

Baker is a functional hoarder with impeccable taste; the hunter-gatherer gene is in his DNA. The eldest of three sons grew up in what is now Central Plano — his father a Texas Instruments mechanical engineer and author, his mother an artist. The self-confessed "art kid" never got into sports but took pottery classes and collected butterflies, stamps and beer cans (about 800, he estimates). "I would work the nearby creek and old buildings for objects to bring home." Years later, not much has changed.

The entire Baker clan, in fact, is sufficiently eccentric and accomplished to come straight out of a Wes Anderson film.

Youngest brother David founded the ride-share Austin Yellow Bike Project and now operates a community bike shop in New Mexico, where, according to Baker, he and his wife are "a total back-to-the-earth, vegan, off-the-grid family" happily living in a solar-powered house constructed of straw bales.

Middle brother Mark is an Albuquerque-based architect who spends his spare time on Internet start-ups, including OozingGoo.com ("the ultimate lava lamp site"), the defunct Archibot.com (architecture news) and Tennisopolis.com, a 100,000-member behemoth Baker sums up as "Facebook for tennis fans."

Mark says he and William "fought like crazy" growing up. No one is more surprised than he is that they now collaborate so seamlessly. The brothers co-designed their parents' sprawling new contemporary home in Santa Fe (David welded the steel railings), and also created Dallas' East Side Lofts near downtown. "We each know what our strengths are, and we don't let ego get in the way," Mark says.

The brothers also share a longtime devotion to West Texas art enclave Marfa, since attending a Frank Gehry-led design symposium there in the mid-'90s, long before the Condé Nast crowd started showing up. Artist friends Camp and Buck Bosworth passed along a hot tip on a modest 1940s adobe cottage — wood floors, plaster walls — for sale on Waco Street. The brothers pooled resources to buy it and have spent working vacations ever since to slowly renovate it. Along the way, Baker added a crumbling Victorian farm house on prime Lincoln Street. He has big plans for it, too — someday.

If two Marfa houses are good, why not an entire development? ("Why not?" could be the unofficial family motto.) In 2004, the brothers partnered with Dallas architect-friend Sharon Odum to purchase an operating trailer park and have already completed renderings for a community of simple, eco-friendly modernist homes. Working name: Third Street Compound. Stumbling block: A conservative Marfa city council wary of outsider hotshots building a communal enclave (narrow lots, shared greenway space, fire pits) on their turf. For now, William plays landlord, dealing with water breaks, paying taxes, collecting rent.

Back in Oak Cliff, Baker picks up a box of old biscuit tins destined for Uncommon Objects and turns to lock up the house. Just up the street is our final stop, and perhaps Baker's most harebrained project: a dilapidated 1917 building he envisions as his own loft-like dream home. Peering at the plywood-boarded windows and crumbling red brick, it's almost impossible to picture his imagined — indeed, already fully conceived and on paper — utopia, with its concrete floors, vaulted ceilings, separate master-suite building and "outdoor courtyard with a fireplace to have breakfast." (Don't mind the gunshots. More coffee?)

For all the dreams and planning, does Baker ever envision sharing that future? He's open to the idea, but for now, his closest companion is an "oil-stained-asphalt colored" Catahoula-Labrador mix named Trouble.

"William isn't comfortable stopping very much," Webb says. "He doesn't even rest or sleep eight hours. It's difficult for him to slow down and fall in love."

Even design-partner Jones finds it hard to keep up. "William is hideously talented. Stupid talented. The thing I dislike most is that you can't pin that talent down. He's like a butterfly. Too many things going on.

"It's all in his brain, and it would only take 15 minutes to get at it," Jones says, "but he's like *bing, bang, boom* and off to the next thing. William has always been very ... *kinetic*."

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