



## DANA BIXBY Architect

### MOVING INTO KNOWING

By Stefanie Weber  
Photography of Jackie Cooper  
(also photos courtesy of Dana Bixby)

*Dana Bixby built her practice as an architect from a strong foundation in carpentry work, which she began at the age of twelve. She relates her passion for architecture to social theory, spatial morphology, and gender identity, and defines what she calls the 'essential spirituality of architecture'. Dana speaks with enthusiasm about architectural theory and practice which she uses to search for the balance between the tangible and the ephemeral.*

*Our conversation began in the unique art deco districts of South Beach Miami and culminated back home in the quiet and quaint country village setting of West Stockbridge where Dana maintains her architectural studio.*

Stefanie: What is the "world" of architecture?

Dana: Working in the world of architecture is working in the world of ideas. Yet, it is also working in the dirt. "An architect must have her head in the clouds and her feet in the sand" is a well-known expression about architecture.

I decided to be an architect when I was 12 and when to a college reunion at my father's college. We stayed in a dormitory that was in a city. Something about living in a city was very special to me. I cannot explain this directly but that was when I decided to be an architect. With hindsight I would say that it is society, in addition to the clouds and the dirt, that is inherently part of architecture.

Growing up, I was around people that built things. Building was always a very natural thing to me. As small kids we built cities out of refrigerator boxes, urban landscapes at the beach, and tree houses. When I was around 13-14 years old I managed to do several projects for my parents including a kitchen and a screen porch renovation. I began to do jobs for other people and in college always worked summers as a carpenter. I became skilled and talented at



DANA BIXBY ARCHITECT, HOME IN ALFORD, MA

building and people always invited me back to do more work. I put myself through graduate school in England with carpentry and renovation work.

Today, I know that architects are supposed to break limits. We are supposed to give something to people that they never imagined before. Yet it's a funny business. Clients come to us and say, "Can I please have X?" You have to be sure to give them "X." But if you don't actually give them a little bit of "Y", which is the surprise, the wonder, and beauty, the magnificence of darkness and light. Then you are not being an architect. That is the very core of architecture.

There's nothing quite like architecture. In being an architect, you have to listen to people, pay attention to them and take account of what they say. You have to be very knowledgeable of all the building codes that apply to what you are building. You have to know a variety of issues that have to do with heating, cooling, and structure. Or you have to know how to maintain and manage the consultants that help you do all that. You also have to be able to communicate to contractors in a variety of forms whether through drawings, words or written documents. You have to know how to build trust amongst all the people associated with the building project. You have to know materials and their qualities and the characteristics of how materials behave, for example at different temperatures. Finally, you have to know what it costs. Successful architects bridge all those components: spatial, economic, personal, social, technical, structural.

But what architecture actually is has to do with knowing space. You have to know what space is and how to conceptualize, communicate, describe it, and imagine it.

Stefanie: What have you had a passion for in your architectural work that you hope to do more with?

Dana: The world is too much all the same. Strip malls. MacDonald's. The same stores, now all over the world, not just in this country. Global capitalism. The struggle everywhere has to be to preserve differences, to nurture differences, to create differences, and to be local.



DANA BIXBY, ARCHITECT  
RUSTIC HOUSE

Our bucolic Berkshires must be defended because they are unique and local. But when one lives in the Berkshires it is really essential to get out of the Berkshires fairly often to be reminded of how most of the world really is kind of all the same. You have to work fairly hard to find what is not the same these days.

This Christmas I drove south to visit my brother in Richmond, VA via the Maryland Shore and the outer banks of North Carolina and I had such a terrible sensation of negative energy in passing through so many strip malls with so many cars on my way to a few special places at the edge of the ocean.

Counteracting and fighting the meaninglessness of all this has been my passion. Over the years I have let myself be distracted from doing something with this passion but now that things are coming together in my life I feel that focus coming back.

The trip south reminded me of my undergraduate college days when I did a project called "The Disappearing Gas Station." We had a lot of latitude in design studios to make up the projects we did. This was sort of a conceptual thing that had an evolutionary time component. There was a model of four phases and in the first there was a conventional above ground gas station. In the last stage all of the actual gas station functions were underground. Only the entrance and exit were above ground.

This was not exactly revolutionary because there were, of course, still cars in this system. But it was about a change, even if it was not a change in the underlying system.

Then in graduate school, when I was first at the Architectural Association in 1973, one of my first projects was a multi media presentation about MacDonald's fast food restaurants. I did a slide show set to the song "Killing Me Softly" by Roberta Flack I cannot honestly say now what the didactic architectural purpose of this was. I know my general interest at the time was meaning in architecture. The interest in architecture then was seen through the lense of "semiotics" as it had been fashioned by Roland Barthes, a French semiotition who was popular then. I have since learned that one should actually study the space of architecture, not some system of signs that one thinks represents architecture. The subtext of my presentation which no one but me knew, was that the cultural system of gender was killing me personally. It took me another 30-35 years to know that, say it, and do something about that.

On that recent drive south I had, at one moment, the overwhelming sensation that the only solution to what has happened in this malled over world is for a large part of what has been built is to be completely destroyed and built

differently, or not built at all. This is the apocalyptic version of urban planning that really has little reality, except perhaps in the context of an actual catastrophe such as for example, global warming. In fact, advocates for New Urbanism have contributed greatly in the rebuilding efforts after Katrina.

Stefanie: In the past I have heard you speak ardently about clarifying the concepts and action of New Urbanism. Is the "New Urbanist" movement part of the strategy you want to follow to create sustainable local environments?

Dana: The movement of New Urbanism, as much as I sometimes do not care for its historicism and prescriptive orientation, is a wonderful counter force to the traditional suburban pathway of development in this country. What I want to see coming from New Urbanism are real neighborhoods that are instrumental in nurturing human life and society and not just another version of symbolic social integration. An example of the latter is the much-discussed example of the town of Celebration, Florida that was developed by the Disney Company. Other examples that tend towards this "symbolic integration" are the shopping centers that are remade into new shopping centers that feel like neighborhoods but are still just shopping centers. Then of course there are the shopping centers that are remade and are claimed to be "New Urbanist", but are nothing of the kind.

Then there is the Smart Growth movement that is also a genuine counter force against traditional forms of suburban car oriented development. Smart Growth is transit orient and compact in its intention. There is a focus on getting people out of cars, and a focus on reducing energy waste. I have great respect for the Smart Growth movement and it's advocates.

Fundamentally, in all of this, it is the paradigm of the car that has destroyed human space.

But both of these disciplines, New Urbanism and Smart growth, are normative practical activities in the professions of planning and urban design. My passion has been for the meaning of space. It has been through my involvement with the Space Syntax research in London that I have found a path to really understanding how society builds significance to the spaces it inhabits. Knowledge of the morphology of space is a prerequisite to the formation of meaning of space. More recently, it is through personally understanding the experience of movement that I come to see this is also a necessary component of how people build meaning as they use space.

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DANA BIXBY ARCHITECT



DANA BIXBY, ARCHITECT, HOME IN STEPHENTOWN, NY



PHOTO: JACKIE COOPER, SPACE

Stefanie: Has the experience of movement altered your relationship and understanding of space and its' meaning?

Dana: In the past, I learned to write papers and do academic research. I learned to describe space through the formal methods of Space Syntax. A couple of years ago I seriously looked at doing a PhD with a colleague of mine from grad school days, John Peponis, who now teaches in Georgia. I am becoming less interested in that as I am now discovering that architecture has to have movement as a component. Meaning in architecture does not only come from the brain, it comes from moving through space as well as knowing the logic of space. The premise of Space Syntax is that space is logical very much in the way that language is logical. I would say that this is a foundation for meaning of space. We know space as we know language and, as with speaking a language, we give meaning to what we speak by how we speak, articulate and move as we speak. Meaning in space is not just what we know of it, it is also how we articulate it and move through it.

As an example, walking is a seemingly simple example where a person walking is the "figure" and the space around the person is the "ground." When looked at dynamically though, as a person walks each leg alternates in a process of "loosing weight" and it is at this moment of loosing weight that the leg shifts from being part of the figure to being part of the ground. The dynamics of the "figure" is related to dynamics of its carrying weight.

This example came from training I have had at the Spacial Dynamics Institute run by Jaimen McMillan in Mechanicville, NY. I have immense respect for Jaimen and it is thru such examples of seeing how a simple static concept such as the classic "figure/ground" relationship relation has this dynamic that I have been motivated to look at architecture for its dynamics as well as its logic.

Stefanie: Getting back to something you mentioned earlier about the personal context of gender as killing you. Does this relate to your experience in your body as being a transgendered person? And how has architecture spoken to you of and for that?

Dana: I used to think that my body was just a thing. It had boundaries, my skin. The appearance of this skin took on an excessive importance because the presumption was that in some way it had to represent me. This is much like how I used to think of buildings. They are clearly "things", objects in space with boundaries. What may not be self evident in everyday thinking about buildings is that they too have "skin." In architecture the "skin" of a building is often thought about and designed in great detail. The skin of a building, in everyday language, is known as a facade.

Much of the exercise of design work has to do with design of the facade. We seem to concern ourselves with much attention to the surface of the building. It can sometimes seem as if that is all that there is to be designed.

In relation to this, I also used to think that my appearance was of consequence. By manipulating appearance, I thought, the soul within could be made visible because the appearance would then represent to others what is actually "inside."

In attending the movement workshop at Spacial Dynamics, I learned that the surface of the body is not the site for the manipulation of "appearance" but rather is a place of connection



DANA BIXBY, PHOTO BY JACKIE COOPER

between the space of the body and the space around the body. Seeing this surface as a “connection” seemed to have more substance as compared to it being “just appearance”, for example, representing something else. “Appearance” is unreal, ephemeral and suspect. A “connection” is something more integral and really necessary to the system.

In my transgender path, for so much of the time, I was preoccupied with appearance. The idea was that if I manipulated the appearance enough, then there would be clarity of meaning and all would become sorted out. That was the first stage of my thinking, and with hindsight I see that it was embedded in a paradigm of semiotics and language.

However, that paradigm shifted. To begin to see the surface of the body as a connection and not just appearance takes the pejorative of “appearance” away from the theory. Also, since differences in appearances cannot be denied or ignored, it also creates a framework for which it is important to be able to define and articulate. The appearance is the connection. We want the connection to work, so we are careful about what it is. It is also the fact that the appearance is the manifestation of these aspects of our form. We do not customarily see outer form. The space around us is not so visible. The inside of our body space is of course also not visible. The inside of our minds is not visible. Thus “appearance” is the important manifestation of all these other aspects of our form, not to represent them but to be a part of them by connecting them.

Stefanie: Do you believe that a large part of what we see with our eyes is really just a result of what we see with our mind?

Dana: Yes, and also with our bodies as we change the space by moving, then we change the perception.

Stefanie: There is a collaboration between space, mind, moving and perception and the maker of those. Can you share some more insight into how architecture is and can be perceived?

Dana: When people speak of architecture in everyday language, they most often think of just buildings. But really what is known, experienced, and moved through is the space between buildings. The most common, everyday word for this is “street” but the space between buildings can take many forms and configurations. Plaza, alley, court, boulevard – these are all different kinds of spaces between buildings. Each of these spaces may come in different sizes such as wide or narrow and long or short. When you start enumerating this you can see that the complexity, types, and scale of the space between buildings is quite varied.

It is also the space between buildings and nature that is interesting. For example in South Beach in Miami Beach there is a wonderful park between Ocean Avenue and the beach. This park connects to a boardwalk just to the north, which in turn connects to all the hotels that line the beach. It is this pattern of permeability and connectivity that enables people to move. It does not cause them to move. It allows them to discover the possibility of moving. Once there is the possibility, perceived by the individual, movement can happen and perception changes. Figure-ground relationships shift and the way a person sees the things around him or her changes and the experience of buildings and space is no longer a static image.

This is both the essence of the Space Syntax research and why the Space Syntax work has its limits, since it does not take account of the dynamics of this movement. It is so important to always remember that there is never a quality of space if there is not a quality in the underlying morphology. The permeability and connectivity of a morphology must be there if there is to be urban life, for example. Because, if the permeability and connectivity is not there, then there cannot be the richness of movement that engenders the richness of experience that constitutes the richness of urban life.

The whole problem with suburbia and shopping malls can be summed up by the metaphor of the cul-de-sac. It is a dead end. There is only one way to move. Any “movement” in this world has to be done in the symbolic world of the fantasy of mass media. There is no future for that world. The only problem is that so many people are drugged by it and do not know that yet.

Stefanie: As a dancer and choreographer, space has been a contributor in the discovery of my own spiritual identity. Have you moved into any spiritual understanding on your path with all of this?

Dana: I learned through the essence of being transgendered to recognize that identity is a spiritual thing. It opened me up to spiritual things. Sounds like an oxymoron, spiritual things.

There is spirit in this world, and there is spirit in architecture. Even before I knew that I am a spiritual being, I connected to the spiritual experience of architecture. I’ve always loved architecture and special places. Everyone has special places they can refer to, special places that, when we let ourselves be open to it, we recognize as having a spiritual quality. I am glad that I am an architect and can relate to and experience space in this way because in the past “spiritual” was always a bit too ephemeral for me. That is changing for me personally, but I will always look to a balancing between the abstract and the earth and the things of architecture for spiritual meaning and embodiment.

Stefanie: I experience a myriad of metaphors and ‘themes’ present in your work. Curve becomes gesture. Old transforms to new. Before is after. Connections that suggest movement through. Spaces that incite illumination and lift. The parallel between what you do with your body and what you do with architecture. What more can you say about your work and your expression as an architect?

Dana: Buildings are not metaphoric. Buildings are not instead of something else or representing something else. They are themselves. The best lesson I have learned is that when we study architecture, we study space. We build space, and then space builds other spaces. This is the heart of the lesson I learned from my graduate school professor, Bill Hillier, who developed the Space Syntax research. So much has been written, said, studied, talked, and researched about what architecture looks like. But that is not the point at all. It is all about space. And how we move through it. And yet, we have minds and will. If we do not like the space we are in we can move in a different direction. Or change the space.

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DANA BIXBY ARCHITECT, RUSTIC STAIRCASE