

The
CABINET

Bedford
JOURNAL

Hollis Brookline
JOURNAL

Merrimack
JOURNAL

Merrimack
MARSH



CABINET.COM

WE'RE YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

Article published Jan 18, 2007

The art of old

Architect Rolf Biggers specializes in blending new construction with old surroundings

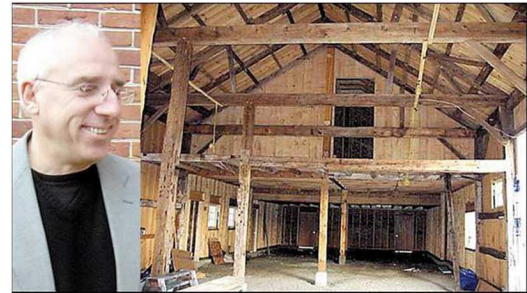
By Susan Childress

Call him a house whisperer, or a channeler of the past.

"Whatever it takes," would be Rolf Biggers' response.

Since he launched BMA Architectural Group in 1991, the 50-year old architect has become known as the solver

of a very special problem: how to build new structures that feel as if they belong in old places.



Hollis' Lawrence Barn during reassembly in 2005. Biggers redesign doors, windows and interior of salvaged 1780 double English barn for use as a community center.

Want to add a family room to the back of a 200-year old Cape, or plop a glass-front hotel in the middle of an historic mill district?

The answer, says Biggers, is surprisingly simple: Don't try to replicate.

"We don't want to freeze something in time," he explained in his Amherst Village office. "By putting old and new together, the old will seem as old as it should, and the new will beckon for a different reason. It's a difficult balance to achieve."

But it's a problem that fascinates Biggers, who acquired his love of architecture as the young son of a career Army officer stationed in Europe.

The approach he often uses has roots in Europe, where "old" can often mean 800 years old.

"European designers have learned not to be afraid to juxtapose modern materials, such as stainless steel and glass, with very old hand-hewn beams and plaster walls," he said.

Still, the idea frequently requires fresh interpretation, which is why Biggers and his 10-member team, three of whom have interior design expertise, have a habit of bouncing ideas back and forth.

No matter the scale of the project, the formula works the same.

For a vaulted conservatory on the back of a late 1700s colonial in Amherst, tall, arched windows make the room feel big from the inside. A hip roof gave added style while keeping the scale small.

When Biggers' team designed the new 127-room Hilton Garden Inn in the heart of the Manchester mill district, they only had to look around the site to know what to do. The five-story brick and glass structure, sited just a few feet from the baseball stadium, looks like a reincarnated mill building.

Though residential projects make up just 5 percent of his business, Biggers said they take extra time and keen intra-personal skills. At the same time, he said, they can be fun after a large commercial project.

"It's highly emotional, with a client's own space" he said. "They want a high degree of involvement in the design."

Another skill the team has acquired over the years is how to size up a client and work accordingly. The newly built Wilton police station and the reincarnated Lawrence Barn in Hollis are two recent projects that required working with municipalities, which is an especially important skill in New England, he says, where new buildings must blend with antique settings and old structures often fall into the hands of a town that doesn't quite know what to do with them.

In the case of Hollis' Lawrence Barn, disassembled in 1999 and resurrected on town land in 2005, Biggers knew community members needed unequivocal advice, and quickly. Not all the funding for the project had been raised, and momentum was important.

"He understood what we were trying to accomplish," said Lawrence Barn Committee Chairman Jim Cram.

Biggers didn't hesitate, Cram said, to give an opposing opinion on critical aesthetic details. I suggested a green color for the roof, and Rolf immediately said 'No!' and showed us another, more subtle color which worked better for such a large expanse."

"He was right on," said Cram.

The design for the Wilton Police Station was a small-scale interpretation of the rather grand architecture of town hall, which Biggers and BMA architect Lynn Schur identified as an icon in town.

A renovation project at Amherst Town Hall was another instance where Biggers teamed up with others — this time with a cadre of skilled volunteers and Amherst architect Bob Jackson — to minimize the visual and emotional impact of a major overhaul to the town's much loved, and used, headquarters.

Despite the addition of an elevator and a completely revised floor plan, the building has somehow kept its 1825 feeling.

"People seem to be pleased," said Historic District Commission Chairwoman Helen Rowe. "The building still makes a statement."

Whether it's a town building or privately owned, the way to understand what to build is to observe the building's surroundings, and the way it is being used first, said Biggers. For example, he said, Amherst's village green needs to function as a community as well as retain its historic character.

"It's a living breathing thing. We need to keep its character and its physical aspects, and at the same time let it grow and morph over time."

To adjust to the increased activity on the green, several Village residents have commissioned Biggers to build master suites in the back of their existing houses, "for privacy and peace and quiet," he said.

Biggers said the new condominiums that were built several years ago around an historic granite house in Milford, are an example of what not to do.

The new, slightly taller, buildings are crowded around the old structure, the town's one remaining house built of local granite. There is no context and no continuity and not a very good use of the river view, he said. A good barn that was also on the property could have been used instead of torn down, he said.

"It's not architecture," he said of the project, "it's a travesty.

For Biggers, a cheerful, energetic man, becoming known as a stickler with a passion for historic detail has brought some interesting dilemmas, and has had him doing some surprising things.

There was the six-story hotel in Waltham that he built on a tiny triangular lot on a cliff. "We needed nine variances," he said.

Then there was the Hilton Garden Inn in Manchester, which unearthed a surprise, a granite monolith that was the foundation of the mill city's original Boston and Maine rail roundhouse.

Biggers has built a thriving practice that is known as far away as Oklahoma and Utah, and he knew he had gained a reputation when he was asked to design bachelor officer living quarters that would jut off a rock outcropping at a Connecticut nuclear submarine station.

A local market niche, plus word-of-mouth referrals in other parts of the country, have made his business grow,

despite a highly competitive market, which he says seems unaffected so far by sluggish residential sales.

Even so, the dearth of buildable land and the keen competition for commercial projects keeps him on his toes,

"You can't just drop square footage," he said, "You've got to build something that has meaning."
