

COMBINING ASPECTS FROM HER PERSONAL LIFE AND THE WORLD AROUND HER,  
DEBORAH BERKE ALWAYS STRIVES TO BRING A LIVELY APPROACH TO A STRUCTURED INDUSTRY.

# BUILDING FROM EXPERIENCE



## WORDS BY CRYSTAL HAMMON + PHOTOGRAPHY BY HADLEY 'TAD' FRUITS

ARCHITECT DEBORAH BERKE REGARDS LIFE AS AN ELEGANT STRAND CONNECTING the personal, professional, and creative self. Work comprises an important part of the strand, and it should be respected, celebrated, and enjoyed—not something we dread.

"I don't think about what I would rather do instead of work," Berke says. This ethos may explain why Berke enjoys designing spaces that encourage people to feel vital and productive at work. She sees an office building as much more than a place to just work; it also exists as physical object, capable of inspiring thought and joy.

Designed with intention, a building can be as meaningful for citizens on the street as it is for admirers of architecture or the people who work there.

"You may hate a room, love a room, or always sit in a certain chair because of what you can see from that particular place," she says. "That's architecture impacting your life."

Berke believes architecture often derives a unique sense of place from native attributes. She says the uniqueness of place should trump a style of building that emphasizes the most space for the least expense.

"It makes me sad more cities across this country are starting to look the same, as far as how buildings are clad and street fronts are treated," she says.

A more appreciative audience for these sensibilities could hardly be found than Cummins Inc. The company selected Berke's New York-based firm, Deborah Berke

Partners (DBP), to design its Indianapolis distribution headquarters, which opened in January. Cummins had a rigorous set of standards for the building, reflecting its emphasis on people, innovation, and community engagement. They wanted to accommodate all types of work, including spaces for the social, active, collaborative, focused, and contemplative effort.

The Fortune 200 company also saw their new downtown location as an opportunity to enhance the city's unique urban landscape and draw people eastward. Berke's firm fulfilled these ambitions with an iconic building and lush green space on the former site of Market Square Arena, now an urban plaza that serves as a magnet for retail shopping and public enjoyment.

A native Hoosier could easily overlook one of the traits her team leveraged in designing the Cummins distribution headquarters: the city's relationship with the sun. The interior is embellished by site-specific art commissioned by Cummins and lit by natural light. The building's calibrated façades are covered in various kinds of glass, shades, and vertical fins to conserve energy and maintain a comfortable indoor temperature through all seasons.

"Even on those steel gray days the Midwest gets during winter, the light in Indianapolis





has a silvery quality that I find particularly beautiful,” Berke says. Her observations about what makes Indianapolis special stem from past and present work in the city, including the 21c Museum Hotel at Old City Hall and residential projects.

Berke developed a taste for architecture as a teen. At 14 she came home from a long walk and announced plans to become an architect. Home was a leafy Queens neighborhood in New York City, where everything was accessible on foot—from the church and the school, to the retail shops and train station. Walking the neighborhood, Berke noticed how varied the houses were and wondered what went on inside the structures. Throughout Berke’s more than three decades of practicing, teaching, and thinking about architecture, walking has remained a huge part of her creative ritual.

“I walk several miles every day,” she says. “When I walk, I absorb what I see and weave it into my mental library.”

Her evenings end with a book before bed. Over most weekends, Berke makes a pilgrimage to one of New York’s many museums, toting a pad and a pencil, ready for what makes her feel most creative: drawing.

Evidently, these rituals provide plenty of fuel for her creative soul. In addition to a demanding workload at the architecture and interior design firm she founded in 1982, Berke has two new books to her credit. *House Rules* summarizes eight guiding principles that define DBP’s residential work. In early 2017, the London-based publishing house, Artifice Books on Architecture will release *Working*, a book covering the firm’s design of spaces for work, music, art, and creativity.

Adding to her accolades, she recently became dean of the School of Architecture at Yale University. Berke’s new academic post is not a diversion; it’s the culmination of a lifetime of teaching, including academic roles at Yale University, University of Maryland, Rhode Island School of Design, University of Miami, University of California at Berkeley, and the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies.

In the early stages of her career, teaching provided a guaranteed income while Berke built her architectural practice. Eventually, it delivered something more potent than money. “Even when I felt too busy for it, the value of teaching exceeded the burden,” she says. “It requires very clear thinking about architecture in general and my ideas in particular. The rigor and intellectual discipline is something I can offer my students, and it enhances my work.”

Put Berke in front of a class or an audience and you see a confident extrovert who enjoys speaking. However, when she goes to work, the switch is flipped.

“I’m very introverted and totally focused on the work when I’m in my studio,” she says. From the first sketch through everything it takes to make architecture a reality, Berke loves the design process.

Like any creative person, she occasionally feels depleted.

**The antidote for getting stuck is simple:  
“Take a break, go for a walk, and come back  
to your work with fresh eyes,” Berke says.**

When students ask how they can develop their creative side, she advises them to work hard, keep their eyes open, and be generous toward others and the environment. Even the things we don’t like offer something if we give them a chance.

“To be generous is a good skill—a good way to be in the world,” she says.

If today’s architecture needs anything, Berke thinks it’s more thoughtfulness and less elaboration. In this worldview, time spent with family and friends—eating good food, drinking good wine, and exchanging great ideas—can be as conducive to designing architecture as anything else. Everything you do is an opportunity to be creative, whether you’re writing a letter, arranging flowers in a vase, or wrapping a gift.

“For me, being creative means living an active life,” Berke says. <=3

