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# Connected by Design

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De Space Designs' redesign of the YMCA Anthony Bowen pays homage to its iconic founder and gives the District of Columbia's Shaw neighborhood a safe space to exercise, connect and dream.

Interior architect Diane Taitt, ASID, has worked on 10 YMCA centers in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. And her recent renovation of the YMCA Anthony Bowen – founded by its namesake, a former slave, in 1853 as the world's first YMCA open to African Americans – has forever changed the founder and managing principal of De Space Designs.

Taitt, who holds a bachelor's degree in architecture from the Pratt Institute and an MBA from Baruch College, both in New York City, was director of Interior Architecture at Leo A Daly before she launched her own boutique architecture studio in Washington, D.C., in 2005 to focus on earth-centered design. Her previous commercial work on Ys, namely building the YMCA Potomac Overlook, earned first place in Commercial Interior Design from the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID, 2007), first place in Interior Architecture from the American Institute of Architects (AIA, 2006) and a Citation for Excellence in Design from Builder magazine (2006).

### MISSION Y

In 1912, the YMCA Anthony Bowen moved from its original location into its current building in D.C.'s historic Shaw community. Nearly 100 years later, that facility was dilapidated. Its redesign became an opportunity to reinvigorate the Anthony Bowen Y's powerful story of unwavering courage and perseverance. "As a designer of color, it's an absolute honor to work on a project like this," Taitt says. "The [Y] had no money. With the changing demographics in the neighborhood, they were being pushed out." Today, the site is a mixed-use development, and the new 44,000-square-foot state-of-the-art YMCA is the anchor tenant.

Limited resources and organizational changes turned realizing the Y's evolving vision for the renovation into an arduous four-year journey. Taitt and her team often had to value-engineer on the fly. "The one thing YMCA CEO Angie Reese-Hawkins was very clear on was her commitment and her vision to honor the legacy of Anthony Bowen," Taitt says. "Her passion was really motivating to me."

### DESIGNING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

De Space Designs aimed to deliver a relevant design concept that would epitomize the vigor of Anthony Bowen (1805-1872), who never let his adverse circumstances determine his future, and to connect people across cultures, races and economic boundaries in a neighborhood in the midst of a demographic shift. "We needed to reach everyone: poor, wealthy, young, old," says Taitt. "It's wonderful to see everyone working out next to each other, the kids in the class – just a rainbow of colors." New membership has exceeded expectations; patrons are engaged and feel welcomed. "I've walked into the facility to be hugged by staff and members, thanking me for the attention to detail and the struggle they know we had to fight to keep the little details in the project that make a real difference to the regular users."

### CONNECTED THROUGH SPACE AND TIME

Taitt used design elements that represent connectivity through time – including a story wall, installations by local artists, and quotes by African-American heroes who touched the Anthony Bowen Y – to honor the space's rich, colorful history and its founder's legacy. Horizontal transparency and vertical continuity between the floors create connectivity through space, breaking the mold of older, more closed-in Y spaces. The 20-year interior design veteran notes that she intentionally "accented the sleek, modern metallic pewter finish throughout with symbolic strokes of vivid green, the color of balance, harmony and growth, and orange, the color of adventure and social communication."

A key objective for the reinvented facility was to house new programs to accommodate the changing demographics of the neighborhood – cooking, rock climbing, sunrise yoga on the rooftop. Taitt's most interesting challenge, though, was that her design also needed to facilitate organizational change within. Smaller, more open offices now foster collaboration among staff. "It's really interesting how a space can help mold that change," Taitt says.

### EARTH-CENTERED DESIGN

Using design elements to make meaningful connections across time and space is part of De Space Design's characteristic earth-centered design approach. "We're creating sensory journeys, and this facility was a perfect opportunity to explore and include some of these concepts," Taitt says. Influenced by a childhood in England and her Caribbean heritage, she believes the fluidity of her designs represent "a signature style connected to the flow of the islands."

Beyond the feelings it inspires, the Anthony Bowen Y's redesign is founded on a platform of sustainable materials, exemplified by recycled rubber and concrete floors, Kirei board on the walls, bamboo ceilings, LED light fixtures, low-VOC paint and a living vegetative wall in the courtyard.

### CHANNELING BOWEN

Despite the project's many challenges, Taitt persevered. "At times, I felt like I embodied the spirit of Anthony Bowen; the determination and commitment he had to have to see a project like this through," she says. "This experience has brought resilience and a laser focus and an honor to me." She hopes the Anthony Bowen YMCA project will become a well-referenced standard of excellence for Y's across the nation, perhaps internationally.

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Diane Taitt, founder and managing principal, De Space Designs