



Ethics in Business: Interview with Architect Joan Krevlin

Joan Krevlin , Julia Taylor Kennedy

September 2, 2010



[Joan Krevlin](#)

This interview is part of the Council's second annual **SEPTEMBER SUSTAINABILITY MONTH**, which kicks off a year of events and resources on sustainability. Generous funding of the Carnegie Council's 2010-2011 sustainability programming has been provided by Hewlett-Packard and by Booz & Company.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Welcome to Global Ethics Forum. I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, here with Joan Krevlin to discuss the architect's role in creating sustainable communities.

Krevlin's work as an architect demonstrates what integrity can bring to a career. Deploying form and function with integrity is key to design, and Krevlin manages to do so while maintaining environmental sustainability and social accessibility in her projects.

The American Institute of Architects has recognized the quality of Krevlin's work. The Institute honored her design of the [Queens Botanical Garden Visitor Center](#) in 2008 with multiple awards. This year, the Institute bestowed on Krevlin the rare title of Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

It is my pleasure to welcome Joan Krevlin to Global Ethics Forum.

Let's start our conversation with sustainability.

How and when did you begin to bring environmentally conscious elements into your designs?

JOAN KREVLIN: It's actually an interesting question because it goes back to when I studied architecture.

I studied architecture in the late 1970s, so that was another time in the ebb and flow of thinking about sustainability; one was not thinking with the word "sustainability," but rather about how we used energy. It was a time of another gas crisis. Gas prices were very high. We spent a lot of time in architecture school looking at passive solar use and how we could design architecture to be more responsive to energy needs.

That, of course, was a brief moment in time that then passed and got buried for many years.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I just want to go back to one term. What is passive solar use?

JOAN KREVLIN: It's when you collect solar energy in a way that doesn't involve energy. It's having something that can receive heat. Passive means you are not using a whole lot of technology to make it happen.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: So as you were saying, it kind of got buried over the years.

JOAN KREVLIN: It got buried because we all got busy—not everybody, but many of us got busy doing other things. It was also a political time at architecture school—I was at Washington University in St. Louis doing community design workshops.

I personally had a predisposition to architecture that saw it as a social act, unlike a lot of other ways of looking at architecture, which is as a more formal enterprise. I always had a very strong connection to architecture as a social activity.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How is it a social activity?

JOAN KREVLIN: When I mean social, I don't mean social as in hanging around with your friends. It is social in that one can interact and affect how people live, how people build communities, how we engage with the built environment, and to see how we choose and are able to live our lives. Buildings become enablers to a kind of engagement with everyday life in a way that can facilitate things, as opposed to simply existing unto themselves as objects.

All good architects will understand that successful buildings are inhabited in ways that enhance the grace of life in many ways. You can take that further and realize that they can affect how we make decisions about how we choose to live and how we engage in communities.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: **Let's go down this social path that you've opened up here. Give me some examples of how you can design a building to be more or less facilitating those social engagements.**

JOAN KREVLIN: Any building is often designed for a particular group of people. There are big issues, like affordable housing, that really are integrated with issues of our times in many ways.

Even in the everyday architecture that we do—I will give you an example. Recently we completed a community center for the Sephardic Jewish community in Brooklyn. We were hired in part because they are a very active community that had a very engaged building that was overtaxed for all the uses they had in it, in terms of preschoolers, grandparents and teens all using one building. We were hired to expand the building and make it bigger so it could facilitate all the spaces that they needed.

In reality, when we got started with the project, we realized it was a very unique community that had very strong ties to the neighborhood, to each other, to being a unique, in this case a Syrian community who inhabited a very specific location in Brooklyn. In working with that community to design and expand their building, we went fairly deep into understanding how they used their building and how they could both look back at their past as a community that was so ingrained together, and also how they could build an ongoing community together through the spaces in the building.

Rather than just look at individual spaces, we really looked at the in-between spaces that promoted the sense of community of which they were so proud.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: **If you're using these in-between spaces, how do you as an architect build in elements that build community?**

JOAN KREVLIN: There's almost an essence or a soul to a building that gets inhabited in ways that you didn't expect, by making ways that people can adapt the space to their own use or find ways to spend time doing things that were unanticipated or unexpected, unplanned.

In that example, we had a very oversized lobby corridor in between spaces that extended through the entire building, so that any moment when you left what you were doing, there was this place to just hang out and spend time and look up or down and see other people in the building. So it promoted almost a town hall, town square garden space within the building so that there could be an informal interchange of groups meeting and spending time.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: **You could congregate, in a way.**

JOAN KREVLIN: You could congregate without being told this is a congregation space.

That is a really little example of something, because when one is looking at educational spaces, it is known that those in-between spaces are very important.

I think about it in two ways. One is always looking at the more intangible goals of a building project.

One always starts an architectural project with a written program: We need X number of rooms to do X number of things. We also often meet with our clients and talk about the aspirational goals of the building. What are you trying to have happen with this building that's not just a programmatic need or a functional need?

With an institutional client, it is often how can we use the architecture to speak or express your institutional mission.

It is asking a lot of probing questions that are often surprising to people, and then helping our clients understand in some ways who they are and how they can be even better in that building. Buildings can do a lot of things for groups of people who inhabit them.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Let's talk about the Queens Botanical Garden, because this is one example where you were able to integrate so many different priorities in one project, and it received a lot of acclaim.

How did you bring environmental standards and community-engagement elements? Were those stated priorities from the institution from the beginning, or is that something you brought to the project?

JOAN KREVLIN: When we started with the Queens botanical project, there were two goals that the Garden had. At first we thought that they were separate goals, and then in fact we realized that they were actually one and the same.

The Queens Botanical Garden is located on 39 acres in Flushing, Queens, in the most culturally diverse county in the United States. It has been historically a somewhat underfunded botanical garden, unlike the botanical gardens in Brooklyn and in the Bronx.

It has always been extremely well-used by its neighborhood residents, who represent very broad-based Asian communities, Hispanic communities, people from really all over the place. On any given day you can be in the garden at 8 o'clock in the morning and there are hundreds of people doing *Tai Chi* along the alleys in the Garden. Or on the weekend they have a wedding garden, and it is like looking at a United Nations of how people dress for weddings.

It is a quite extraordinary place.

It has always been known as a garden that brought people, plants, and culture together. That has always been its identity and something that they really wanted to celebrate.

In doing master plan studies, they really understood that to project themselves forward as a garden and develop a really clear identity that would attract visitors from all around the city, one way to distinguish themselves was to show themselves as stewards of the environment. They adopted a very ambitious sustainable mission, which was again to showcase themselves as stewards of the natural environment.

We saw that there were these two different things they were thinking about, to showcase themselves as stewards of the environment and be a place where people, plants, and cultures all came together.

The Garden had first gotten funded to do a master plan, and then their first capital funding was for a building which was to be a visitor center.

You had a garden that was re-imagining itself, with a building as their first capital effort. One of the many challenges is how you have a building really represent a garden and speak to the goals of a garden. We spent a lot of time with the community and, through their own master plan process, meeting with residents of the community and doing workshops to understand what was important to the people who came to the garden.

Across cultures, people spoke about water, and we began to realize that there were certain things in which regardless of where you came from, one could find commonality. It is in how people connect to daily and seasonal environmental change, through rituals, holiday celebrations. No matter what culture you were part of, you connected to seasonal changes as having to do with sun, with longer and shorter days, and certainly with water.

We began to realize that these two distinct goals—to speak to the diverse cultures and to showcase the environment—were really something where we could find very strong common ground.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Describe the building to me as you conceived it.

JOAN KREVLIN: The programmatic goal of the building is to house the offices, meeting, gallery, and retail spaces, and a small auditorium. The auditorium is more of a multipurpose space.

It was to replace an existing administration building that had been sort of front and center when you walked into the garden. The first thing you saw was a building as opposed to a garden. It had long outlived its function.

The building needed to accommodate very specific needs, but it also needed to be something that could have multiple uses within it in terms of meeting space and the multipurpose space.

Our intention with the building was to have it become secondary to the experience of the garden and to have it actually enhance the experience of the garden. It is integrated into the landscape—it has a green roof that grows out of the landscape so that you can't quite tell where building starts and landscape stops. You can rise up on the

hill that is the green roof, which actually becomes the covering of the auditorium below.

There is a very large canopy roof that—when I say canopy, it's a covering of an outdoor terrace space that is quite large, and you see it almost like the wings of a butterfly from a distance. It folds up and it provides the ability for people in the garden to sit and be protected from the rain or sun.

That roof is also actively a water collector. When it rains, it's a nice day to be at the garden because you hear the sound of the rain, which then is collected to a single point and funnels down into essentially a piece of landscape that collects the water and channels it to a cleansing [biotope](#), which is a planted area that cleanses the water. That water is then stored and pumped back to a water stream that runs through the garden and back to the building.

There is the green roof which covers the auditorium, the covered terraced area which is covered by a roof that collects water, and then the offices and meeting space which are in the bar building.

The bar building houses all the offices above and the meeting spaces below. It has a skin, the building enclosure, that is both glass that has sliding doors so that people inside the building can open it, and then a wood brise-soleil. A brise-soleil is, imagine wood venetian blinds that are permanently open, so they filter the south and western sun. They don't close up and down but they act in many ways like an open screen. The skin of the building allows the light to be both filtered into the building and stay somewhat protected.

All of the surfaces of the building are doing work to make the building more environmentally sound and to use fewer resources. Also, because of the explicit nature of what they do, when you're in the building you become more aware of the environment that surrounds you.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: And now, of course, this building is [LEED](#)-certified [Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design] and has, as I mentioned, received accolades for environmental sustainability.

This is a case study of a way to integrate community and sustainability. Stepping back from that, do you think that this is a model that can and should be used? Do you see it being used in other places as a way to try to bring these two ideas together?

JOAN KREVLIN: Where this was successful, was that it did receive a LEED Platinum rating, which is the highest rating in the LEED system. That is very ambitious in terms of the checklists of things it does for energy use, water savings, and the way it uses its landscape. There is a long checklist of things that a building has to achieve in order to achieve LEED Platinum certification. Where this building is more successful is it took those things and almost became a teaching tool.

One of the bigger things that we understand is that in order for people to care about the environment, to want to be more resource-wise, both in terms of how we live and certainly how we build, we have to first encourage people to care about the environment and to notice the things that we impact when we build buildings.

For many years we saw buildings as sealed containers, and we didn't think about their siting, what their exposures were, whether the windows were operable or not, because they were so well air-conditioned and we were comfortable when we were inside. In a way it is stepping back and rethinking what it needs to be comfortable.

There is a wonderful book called [Thermal Delight in Architecture](#). It reminds us historically of how people used to think of shelter as gathering towards a hearth, sitting on a veranda, sitting in a cooled courtyard, as ways to both celebrate and acknowledge the climactic sort of environment that we are in.

The Queens Botanical Garden building connects us back to those thermal elements, whether it's natural breezes or sun or rain, so that we're aware of their presence, we can delight in them, and we think about them in a way that reminds us that we don't need to necessarily seal ourselves off from them.

Being in the building on a hot summer day is very different than being there on a winter day. Early-morning winter is different than late-afternoon summer because of the way the light moves through the water. The water course, which we've collected the water from the roof, bisects the building and runs as a water canal essentially through the building, and you are aware of how plentiful or not plentiful water is.

All of those things connect the visitors to the natural environment and make all this talk about sustainability tangible, so that it became something that is understandable.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You also sit on the [New York City Green Codes Task Force](#). Do you see these lessons that you learned and implemented in the design of the botanical garden catching on?

JOAN KREVLIN: There has been a sea change. When we first started the project in 2000, LEED was new. The city had instituted in a very ambitious way, sustainable guidelines to promote high-performance buildings. In some ways they were very ahead of the time in thinking about guiding public projects to be more sustainable.

But at that time, specifying materials, finding builders and consultants who understood these ambitious goals—our landscape consultants were from the Midwest, our water consultants were from Germany. There was local interest and talent, but there wasn't deep experience to understand what was going to work. We put together a team that drew from far-reaching places in order to have the expertise.

There was often a concern that many of the things that are not very complicated would be more expensive because there wasn't a familiarity with them.

All of that in those ten years has totally changed. There are certainly very few public buildings that are being built that aren't looking very closely at how they are performing. New York City is certainly, through the Green Code Task Force, really revamping their building codes so these things become less optional and become more instituted in how we build.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You started a firm with people, from what I understand, that you went to architecture school with.

JOAN KREVLIN: Three of my partners all went to Columbia together. They started the firm and I joined five years later.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I see.

JOAN KREVLIN: We like to say we all went to school together, but we didn't.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I am curious how you all work together, being such close colleagues for such a long time—these ideas of sustainability, is that something that is really across the firm? Is that something you feel like you bring and are bringing people along with?

JOAN KREVLIN: The entire firm is interested in the issues of sustainability but it often depends on the project. How much can we really bring the client along? How much they are interested themselves?

Across the projects within the office, there is a greater commitment and sometimes a lesser commitment because we don't have the luxury of picking our clients by how committed they are to these issues. But we have tried through the office ethos to imbue that in terms of how we practice.

There are a lot of things that you don't even have to highlight as issues, you just need to meet with clients and say, "Do you want to do a sustainable building?"

It means just making smart choices. Then there are certain things where there are certainly cost implications that are choices, and the client is very much a part of making those decisions.

But as a base line of how we work, we look to be resource-wise and energy-smart. It goes to really wanting to be technically smart and be good architects. A lot of the issues really have to do with things that make good architecture: siting well, using natural light well, thinking about orientation, and the materials that you use.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Do you find that clients are starting to come to you with a certain expectation of the types of sustainability sensitivity that you have?

JOAN KREVLIN: Our clients are very broad-based, and they come to it from a variety of reasons. When we are working with residential developers who are building new buildings, it is often from a marketing perspective. From a marketing point of view, is it important for them to have a building that is sustainable?

We do a lot of work with young children, and there it often has to do with healthy indoor air environments. That's another aspect that is very important to sustainable building, and there is often that kind of emphasis.

We are working with a synagogue right now for whom it is faith-based. We are also working with a group of nuns building a convent, and for them they think the environment is part of their moral responsibility, and it is extremely important for them that they have their own vegetable garden on the roof.

Clients bring very different perspectives in terms of what is important. Again, we try to both understand and make sure that we meet those needs. They are also then interested in the other things that come along with that.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: We started our conversation talking about how you saw an ebb and flow in sustainability when you were first in grad school. Do you fear or feel that you'll see another ebb and flow now?

JOAN KREVLIN: If you had asked me that question a couple of years ago, I would have said I worried that sustainability had become the new fad and that it was really a lot about things that you could buy. Architecture was looking at a lot of high-tech add-ons, and we were all told that we should buy clothes and objects that were green. Instead of using less stuff, we were being encouraged to buy green things.

That has changed to a certain extent. People are concerned about the operating and life-cycle costs of building, owning, and managing a building, and it is taking hold in a seemingly real way. This thinking is here to stay. I don't feel that sense of faddishness that I worried about a few years ago.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What should people be thinking about as they think about creating a sustainable community? If we are moving beyond just consumerism, what else should people be thinking about?

JOAN KREVLIN: The way you're phrasing it is the right way to phrase it. The building is one piece of it, and then it extends to how we choose to live. The generation in their 20s seems to be concerned about local food. That is thinking about how we choose to live and how we engage the environment.

There are larger issues about how and where we choose to build. I hope that it might make for a rethinking of how we use urban environments as denser environments that are less dependent on the car.

Certainly for those of us who grew up in the suburbs, small rural towns, or even small cities that are somewhat underused if not abandoned, we bemoan what happened to those places. There may be an understanding that a more dense area has both social value because it brings communities and diverse groups of people together, and it has multi-kinds of uses, whether it's retail, schools, and residences all being in one place.

We're now looking less at our buildings as objects and much more at how they fit into an ecosystem of a neighborhood and a larger environment.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Has the ability to bring some of these ideas, values and ways of thinking about sustainability in daily work been something that you've really had to cultivate? Or, has it been an organic process where you develop them in response to work that you're doing and it just becomes an integrated part of your life?

JOAN KREVLIN: In terms of how we work, it becomes integrated, but one is always growing as an architect in terms of what is important to you. For me it has always been important to connect the people who are using the buildings that we make to the buildings that we make. I am not interested in architecture as objects.

For me, this is a continuum about thinking how users affect buildings, how buildings affect users, and then also how that extends to place-making in the larger scale. I find it interesting that it sort of harkens back to things that were so important to me when I first decided to study architecture and I worried I would never really be able to engage with in a real way, which is how architecture can affect everyday life in such a real way.

Certainly, as an architect, every project you do is engaging with a whole new set of issues. We are always feeling like we are dilettantes because every project challenges us in a different way.

What is evolutionary is that we are always dealing with a new set of issues, a new set of criteria, and trying to keep up with the abundant knowledge and changing technology that's out there and to stay smart with it all.

We learn from our clients, we learn from the research that is out there, we learn from our colleagues in terms of trying to figure out how to do what we do in better ways. It is very much of an evolving process.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Great.

Well, Joan, thank you so much for joining me here for Global Ethics Forum.

JOAN KREVLIN: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Copyright © 2012 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs