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# Space Exploration

An enlightened architectural firm transforms a sullen property in New York State's Columbia County into an enviable sunny weekend retreat

Text by Amy Holl Ahearn  
Photography by Laura Resen

*The beauty of Spencertown lies within its versatile, yet cohesive design and its lush green outdoor views.*



**James Dixon** of James Dixon Architect PC reveals he always wanted to be an architect. He understands and experiences architecture both pragmatically and viscerally. His pedigree is composed, in part, of a Bachelor in Architecture from the University of Oregon and of a Graduate Diploma in Architectural History and Theory from the Architectural Association, London, with a concentration in 18th century English Architecture. Dixon studied closely the extraordinary archive of architectural drawings of Sir John Soane, R.A., which explains why 18th century British Georgian architecture is among his favorite periods. However, not to be pigeonholed, Dixon is also an admirer of 1940s design for its cutting edge, modernity, new technology and materials. His quest for enduring design is bounded by no era, though influenced by many.



S P E N C E R T O W N



*The Spencertown project received an award from The American Institute of Architects (Eastern New York chapter).*

Enter Spencertown, which like many great properties present themselves with underwhelming architectural appeal. They require a visionary architect to embrace these contradicting notions and prevent homebuyers to balk and walk.

In the project Spencertown, the home in its "before" phase was a trio of attached, unsightly boxes. What existed was an attempt at modern 1980s Cubist architecture. Undistinguished and featureless, the house was pretty much

a drive-by, and the interior remained remarkably dim, despite numerous skylights and the use of large sliding-glass doors.

The site, however, was grand with lovely views; a beautiful slice of land that cried out for a simpatico structure. As he walked through the home, Dixon formulated design solutions in his mind, adding transoms here, a dormer or two there, with built-in storage everywhere, eventually including cubbies above doorways and built-ins in alcoves and hallways.



Before photo by James Dixon Architect PC

*Architect Dixon updated design solutions for this 1980s house by adding transoms, dormers with built-in storage (including cubbies above doorways) and built-ins in alcoves and hallways.*



THE LACKLUSTER ENTRANCE WAS REVAMPED WITH INGENUOUS SIMPLICITY.



*Dixon portrays his interpretation of the farmhouse landscape by combining sunny yellow wooden chairs with a wrought-iron table and chandelier, and a period dark velvet sofa. All of which incorporate a rustic, worn commonality to the dining area.*



Before photo by James Dixon Architect PC

*The dominant white tiles and island underscore the deeply rich espresso-stained wide plank floors, creating a clean, inviting sunny kitchen environment just right for cooking.*



*Double sinks offer up an expansive work space with plenty of storage. Windows offer natural light.*

His clients were extremely supportive of his ideas and approached the project with no preconceived notions, allowing his team to – as Dixon put it – run amok!

The before-and-after results of this project are dramatic.

The new design of the home was informed by the couple for whom it was designed, and since the house was already large, there was no need to expand the existing footprint. The envelope, however, was changed with the addition of windows, porches, dormers, rooflines and detailing. The lackluster entrance was revamped with ingenious simplicity. Dixon defined the space as a front porch by accenting the slight recess of the front facade with a colonnade and metal roof.

One goal of the project was to have the home look like it was changed over time, varying the details slightly from space to space. Dixon replaced the monotonous skylights by carving into the roof and inserting twin-peak dormers on the left side of the front facade, cleverly adding double 2-over-1 lite windows in the space between, complementing and adding girth to the twin dormers. Another lone shed dormer was added to the right; a fourth dormer tops the adjoining section of home, where a wall of

windows floods the interior space with natural light.

Materials are used judiciously and recurrently for effect and cohesiveness. However, boredom has been dispensed. Volume and light were accomplished through the use of white paint, cathedral ceilings and transoms, which Dixon put not only on exterior walls, including over the front door, but on interior walls as well. White painted walls and trim are set off and juxtaposed with deeply rich espresso-stained, wide plank floors. Dark wood beams overhead, a feature repeated in the kitchen island's contrasting legs, add drama and detail in a restrained mode. The fieldstone-clad front porch is an element echoed on the firebox surround.

Architects tend to design their dream homes over and over. James Dixon Architect PC gets the call because it designs for both the client and the locale in which the building will reside. That its designs reflect the clients who employ them sets James Dixon's firm apart. In fact, much of the firm's architects' work is with historic homes, on which they execute additions where the goal is to leave no trace – their presence virtually undetectable. Perhaps there is no explicit "stamp" that specifically defines Dixon's projects, but the hallmark is that the designs are timeless and timely. ■