

# Building a Lasting Firm

An Interview with A. Eugene Kohn,  
Chairman, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates

**EDITOR'S NOTE** In 1976, along with William Pedersen and Sheldon Fox, A. Eugene Kohn founded Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF) with a commitment to outstanding design, quality of execution, and exceptional client service.

The founding partners wanted to create a firm that would succeed well past their own tenures. With this in mind, they sought talented people who could be as good, and ideally better, than themselves. These employees, mentored by the founders, would be the next leaders at KPF—and hold the responsibility of doing the same for following generations.

Today, Kohn serves as Principal and Chairman of Kohn Pedersen Fox. Holding a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Architecture degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, he served in the U.S. Navy on Active Duty between his academic degrees and retired as a Lieutenant Commander. He is an Executive Fellow of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University where he teaches, in addition to teaching at Harvard Business School. He helped establish the Harvard Real Estate Center Academic Initiative, is a founding member of the Wharton School Real Estate Center Advisory Board, and has served for over 30 years on the Board of Overseers at PennDesign. Kohn was a trustee for the University of Pennsylvania and was honored with the 2010 Alumni Award of Merit by the University, the highest award presented to alumni. Kohn has also been recognized with the Wharton Real Estate Center's Lifetime Achievement Award; the University of Pennsylvania – PennDesign Dean's Medal of Achievement, the highest honor awarded by the institution; and the Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Operating as one firm with six global offices, KPF is one of the world's premier architecture firms with approximately 665 staff members from 52 different countries, together speaking a collective 40 languages.

The firm's diverse portfolio comprises corporate headquarters, office buildings, hospitality, academic, medical, research, civic, museum, transportation, residential, and mixed-use projects both in the United States and abroad. Over 100 projects of the firm's completed projects are certified, or pursuing green certification.



A. Eugene Kohn

## How is the firm doing today?

In a word: well. At the end of 2014, the firm suffered the abrupt loss of President Paul Katz. He had been president of the firm since 2009.

Despite the shocking, sad setback, the firm has continued to look within itself for future leaders, as opposed to bringing in new leaders from the outside. They've grown within the firm and developed into the current leaders with a wide knowledge base and acute understanding of our mission. They were able to pick up from

the previous leaders and provide new ideas and approaches based on the sound strategy and 39-year experience of the firm. For each project that the firm has completed, there is a person here who worked on it. Every generation of the firm is represented in experience.

James von Klemperer has always been considered one of the most talented principals at KPF. He is extremely committed and dedicated, and since becoming President has revealed his excellent leadership skills. I have been Chairman since turning over the President's role to previous leaders, most recently Paul Katz, and now James von Klemperer. Jamie took over following the death of Paul Katz, which had an enormous impact on many people, both inside and outside the firm. Due to Jamie's deep understanding of the firm, and with the support of the principals, he was able to make the transition into the role of President from designer in the wake of the loss of Paul.

I have enjoyed the experience of the successful and quick transformation of Jamie. He covers all bases including design, business, and marketing. He has maintained a calm across the firm, and continues to foster a spirit of strength and trust. But we are not a one- or two- or even three-partner firm in terms of leadership; we have enormous depth of creativity, management, technical people and business development professionals. We have a team of 25 principals who cover all aspects of the firm and work collaboratively, representing KPF very well, not only across the U.S., but internationally, with talent and skills. The principals embody through their personal dedication and contributions the meaning and essence of KPF to our clients and the cities we work in. There are also a number of directors, senior associate principals, and associate principals that have been identified as promising leaders for the future.



LEED Gold-certified Blue Pool Road townhomes in Hong Kong

The firm, for key decisions affecting the health and welfare of the firm, is managed by a board of five principals – currently a very senior board. The members are James von Klemperer, Bill Pedersen, Bill Louie, Dominic Dunn, and myself. Jamie leads as the President and a number of senior principals serve on the various committees (management, operations, design, new business, etc.). Over time Bill Louie, Bill Pedersen and I will come off as active members of the board, but we will serve as nonexecutive board members.

As I look ahead, I am enthusiastic about the future, despite turbulence in the economy and global issues. I am confident KPF will remain a great firm, as well as continue to provide significant opportunities for all its members.

**In terms of succession, were you looking at a whole team to prepare for things that might happen as opposed to just looking at a handful of people?**

A transition plan requires the identification and training of individuals to succeed the current leadership. The depth and breadth of the team taking over has to be sufficient to handle the transition. We set out to create a firm that will outlive us long after we put down our pencils. We want to have outstanding talent, commitment to design excellence, and concern for all our staff, not only the top management.

There are many aspects to an architectural firm: design creativity and execution, management, technology, marketing, office community, and client relations. We have to cover all the bases. Therefore our principals each have a major role to fill, whether it is in one or more areas of the firm. With an expanding global practice, more principals are required so that the firm is represented by principals and directors in each of the countries where we have offices.

This gives exposure to people joining the firm, particularly straight out of school to learn, gain experience and move into the vast leadership positions within the firm. Talent, hard work, and commitment are required; but the opportunity is always there.

We are a firm that does not focus on one individual but functions as a team and succeeds through collaboration. We rely on the skills and talents of many people to make it great and to carry out exceptional projects to make a greater product than the combined parts – that is how architecture is really accomplished. ●