The Value of Design

Riverside 66 in Tianjin, China

An Interview with James von Klemperer,
President and Design Principal, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates

James von Klemperer

EDITORS' NOTE *James von Klemperer is President and Design Principal at Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates where he began as a young architect in 1983. In New York, his design for One Vanderbilt will link Midtown's tallest tower directly to Grand Central Terminal. His Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington D.C., Dongbu Financial Center in Seoul, Blue Pool Road Houses in Hong Kong, and Riverside 66 urban market in Tianjin have all received AIA design awards. He has designed some of the world's tallest buildings, including the 555m Lotte Tower in Seoul. In London, he is leading the design of the Wanda hotel and residential towers in One Nine Elms. He is also active on the continent, in particular in Paris, where he is completing a building for the Ministry of Justice. In the academic sphere, he taught at Yale in 2011 as Saarinen Visiting Professor, and will teach the Bass Studio there in 2016. He has lectured at Harvard, Columbia, Tsinghua, Tongji, Seoul National, and Yonsei Universities, the ESA in Paris, and the AMO in Lyon. After graduating from Phillips Academy Andover, he received a B.A. from Harvard in 1979, Magna Cum Laude in History and Literature. In 1980, he was the Charles Henry Fiske Fellow at Trinity College Cambridge. He received his MArch from Princeton in 1983. von Klemperer serves on the Board of Directors of the Skyscraper Museum, as well as the Storefront for Art and Architecture, and is a trustee of Bard College.*

What makes KPF so special?

It's an unusual place to work. On one hand, the firm feels like a series of informal design ateliers, flexible and open to experimentation. On the other hand, we are a disciplined outfit, organized to produce some of the most complex and challenging urban projects of our time. In this sense, KPF is a hybrid, representing the best of a large firm and the best of a small design practice.

Those who work here find inspiration in the breadth of ideas that they are able to explore. To our clients, this flexibility is attractive, because it allows us to tailor each solution and expression to a specific set of needs and desires. The essential nature of much of progressive design is that it's open-ended. We require that each project innovate in some meaningful way, to find something new, with the goal of advancing a particular building type or technique.

The broad range of our work results partly from our structure. Unlike many high-design firms, we don't claim to produce work of one hand or one name, or adhere to one way of thinking. KPF is a collaborative assemblage of talents, a group of individuals who support each other's efforts. I think we can say that we have gathered one of the most accomplished groups of design leaders that has ever worked together under one roof – it's only getting stronger over time. Each of our design principals could lead his or her own firm, yet they choose to work together.

Given this structure of multiple design contributors, it's especially important that we work together closely to develop a set of thoughts and goals about where architecture can go. These shared goals include bigger aspirations about urbanism and sustainability, as well as more specific techniques of how to use materials, fine tune internal functions, and compose facades.

Our principals come together regularly to debate and critique each other's work. To do your own design at KPF is not enough. It's a bit like a college faculty, where respect among colleagues is essential to a supportive culture. We want the young staff, who have recently left the university studio, to continue in the spirit of exploration and speculative thinking. Their enthusiasm is essential to the value of our projects.

Does it work better to hire young people and teach them that culture rather than hiring experienced architects from other firms?

By and large, we have grown from within. This stems from the principals who founded our firm, and are still with us; they believed in creating a nurturing work environment. We've developed a homegrown culture and a process of bringing people up from quite a young age, usually fresh out of school. Over the years, we've been fortunate to have a very high retention rate. From the beginning we were known for offering a good quality of life within the workplace, so we attracted talent. Then, we were fortunate enough to get exciting commissions, which in turn gave our staff good reason to stay. We've had the luxury of assembling a group of senior-level people who started together 10, 15, or 20 years ago, who are as inspired about their work today as they were on day one. Working together over time leads us to a set of shared values and understandings. We've all been through the same journeys.

As the firm grew into a global operation, with offices not only in New York but in London, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul, and Abu Dhabi, it became especially important for us to collaborate across studios, from place to place and project to project. Knowledge from one part of our firm informs our projects in other parts of the world. The transfer of knowledge and skill from designer to designer is very important. Ultimately, this is what gives the work of the firm a strong direction. Buildings designed by different hands come together into a body of work that somehow manifests shared values. Within our portfolio, one can find many different tendencies, but the buildings share basic attitudes and achieve certain consistent qualities.

In order to facilitate cohesiveness, we encourage architects to move around within the firm, from studio to studio and from office to office. This encourages a healthy cross-fertilization. The collegial interrelationships that result create a kind of fabric. From this we also gain shared memory and shared aspirations.

We've also had the luxury of working intergenerationally. The founders who started the firm almost 40 years ago are still here, and yet the firm is being driven by young talent. Having all of these different age groups participating together, respecting each other and learning from each other, is wonderful.

Is there a type of project that is a KPF specialty?

The range of our work is tremendous, and it keeps growing every year. Our ambition is to design at every scale, from new cities to single rooms. While we continue to develop the depth of our expertise in particular building types, such as tall buildings, residential buildings, and airports, we thrive on taking on new challenges. As in many creative enterprises, what is new and different is also exciting. The variety of project types and locations matches the aspirations of the individuals who work here. In our lives as KPF architects, there is nothing we can't experience. We have the opportunity to see the whole world, to work in different cultures, and to design all sorts of buildings, from office buildings to museums, from houses to classrooms.

POSTED WITH PERMISSION. COPYRIGHT © 2015 LEADERS MAGAZINE, INC.

That said, there is a kind of building type that we're especially known for and that aligns with some of our greatest aspirations, and it's the center city, mixed-use project. Such projects as Roppongi Hills, the Jing An Kerry Center, and Hudson Yards are the engines of the modern city, bringing the public together in mixing chambers of office, residential, hotel, and retail space.

Our challenge today is how to organize the urban hubs where uses can combine and people can live happily in very dense settings; how can we allow more people to move through such central zones every day without feeling the oppression of density – the lack of light and air, or stuffy and crowded spaces.

With the right design and engineering, and with the help of technology, these places can become more pleasant and more efficient at the same time. This kind of design challenge defines the sweet spot of our practice, and probably constitutes the biggest contribution we make to the profession. One very important component of this multi-building type is the tall building. As it happens, we have designed a good proportion of the world's most prominent skyscrapers.

How critical is it that people understand that architecture has a much bigger impact than just constructing beautiful buildings?

I think we can all agree that the importance of a single building extends well beyond its specific brief. Buildings influence our social life, contribute to our culture, help to stimulate commerce, create urban landscapes, and affect the larger ecology of the planet. And they can create beauty, which is not insignificant.

Reminding ourselves and our clients of these larger responsibilities of architecture is very important. It's also critical that we communicate such values to other constituencies outside the conference room and beyond the construction site. Architecture is a social art, a gigantic group enterprise. One of our biggest challenges is to work inclusively with communities, and to communicate the value of design to a broad range of stakeholders. Getting a buy-in from the beginning of a large project, and along every step of the way, is critical.

Much of our success, where we find it, has to do with the way we communicate. We need to clearly spell out why good design matters. What drawings and what words do we use to represent a building? The building design may be obvious to us, but whether it gets realized may be a question of whether it is presented poorly or intelligently.

As we undertake a large project, we feel a great weight of responsibility. Our buildings, for the most part, represent once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for a company, a neighborhood, or even a society. No one wants to hear about our bright idea unless they have confidence that we're safeguarding their most important asset, which is their ability to make the project happen. These projects involve staggering levels of investment, both private and public.

Along with the bold strokes of the creative design process, we need to maintain a constant dialogue with the shareholders and the stakeholders who are affected by the building, including those in city government. We need to maintain a keen focus on budgets, on the practicalities of mundane uses, to longevity, and to how buildings can be properly maintained. We are judged by how our buildings will function years and decades after they have been designed. Making good architecture requires balancing the right brain with the left brain, keeping the dreamer in dialogue with the risk averse and the cost conscious.

Do you see more opportunities overseas and is it easier to find exciting projects in emerging markets?

Every five years or so, the international landscape of opportunities for new projects changes. Like the financial markets, waves of building activity cycle around the world. Fortunately, the global nature of our work has allowed us to stay busy in one region while another has been in a slump. We will continue, however, in a positive way, to capitalize on opportunities that come from parts of the world that one would assume would be sleepy or dormant, or even places where there might be a shortage of know-how to do great buildings.

When we started our first project in China, which was in 1989, one could imagine that the most populous country in the world would yield great opportunity, but we had no idea of what was to come. At the time, local technologies and the trades of concrete, steel, exterior wall, and glass were in an infancy compared to where they are today.

Nobody could imagine that a Chinese contractor would confidently build a 110-story Class-A building, mastering the challenges of coordination and construction technics. Yet today we all accept that if we're looking for the most adventurous structures, they are more likely to be found in China than elsewhere else in the world. In only 20 years, the global paradigm has flipped.

As we look to the future, we don't discount any markets. We are working in Africa and South America, and see tremendous potential in their large cities. Also we maintain our interest in those parts of the world that might seem dormant. Even now, in parts of the European Continent plagued by the Greek debt issues and the faltering of the Euro, where there may not a lot of new building, we think it's important for us to stay involved. Our efforts might consist of renovating buildings, lecturing in universities, or doing speculative planning exercises. We like to always have something going in Paris, Frankfurt, and Milan, because more work will emerge in those cities in the future. Also working in those settings keeps us thinking. These great historical centers constitute a big part of our cultural heritage, architecturally and otherwise.

What kind of impact will Hudson Yards have on New York?

In truth, nobody really knows exactly how Hudson Yards will affect New York, but we do know that the impact will be huge and that it will be a great catalyst for our city. The project is turning the city's biggest industrial scar into a totally new neighborhood. We believe that a global market city such as New York needs to continue to grow. This project will allow New York to rejuvenate itself, to define the coming decades in a new way. Part of our job as master planners and designers of the key buildings of Hudson Yards is to imagine what kind of vitality this patch of land can bring to the city. For us, it's about a larger West Side story that includes what will happen at the Javits Convention Center, around Penn Station, along the High Line, and beyond. The fascinating question is exactly how a building project will develop into a community.

As four or five districts start to knit themselves together, we can imagine the synergies that will occur among sub-districts. We can imagine the emergence of a whole flank of Manhattan as an epicenter of New York. Already, the specific commercial energy and cultural vitality appearing in the areas around the highline have transformed that part of the city. Hudson Yards will be the beneficiary of such long term urban transformation. It comes at just the right time in the city's history. The series of parks along the Hudson, which were already being stitched together into a major network of landscape infrastructure, will play into the equation. New spatial synergies involving Hudson Yards will make very cool places for New Yorkers to thrive.

In the design process, is it only in the later stages that you can anticipate the final product?

Generally speaking, design is not a very linear process. Finding the best solution usually involves testing many alternative ideas. Normally, one has to devise and then be prepared to throw away a few good ideas before hitting on the optimal scheme. This comparative method is important for four major reasons. First, it allows one to try unconventional ideas, to try something new. Second, it gives one confidence that the chosen solution is actually better than other approaches. Third, it allows collaboration among colleagues, often involving the youngest members of the team. And fourth, it allows for close communication with clients who are key in selecting a direction. Clients must buy into the design with confidence and enthusiasm, as they become one's essential partner in the long process of realizing a project. In our best projects, our clients are visionary thinkers. They are really the architects of program, commerce, politics, finance, and social structure.

That said, sometimes the first idea is the best. Though we embrace a method of exploring multiple schemes, we shouldn't be afraid of going back to the original sketch, model, or plan diagram. One's first instinct is often right. ●

POSTED WITH PERMISSION. COPYRIGHT © 2015 LEADERS MAGAZINE, INC.