

PURPOSE

Designing Buildings, Shaping Cities

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

EDITORS' NOTE James von Klemperer is President and Design Principal at Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates where he started as a young architect in 1983. His projects have gained recognition in the field, both locally and abroad. In New York, his design for One Vanderbilt will link Midtown's tallest tower directly to Grand Central Terminal. His work on Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington D.C., Dongbu Financial Center in Seoul, Blue Pool Road Houses in Hong Kong, Riverside 66 urban market in Tianjin, the Ga Mashie Urban Transformation in Accra, Ghana, and One Vanderbilt have all received AIA design awards.



James von Klemperer

Jamie has designed some of the world's tallest buildings, including the 555-meter Lotte Tower in Seoul. In London, he recently led the design of two residential towers in One Nine Elms, while in Paris he designed the new offices for the Ministry of Justice.

In the academic sphere, Jamie taught at Yale in 2011 and in 2016 as the Saarinen Visiting Professor, leading a design studio in exploring dynamic relationships between architecture and urban development. He has lectured at Harvard, Columbia, Tsinghua, Tongji, Seoul National, and Yonsei Universities, the ESA in Paris, and the AMO in Lyon as well as in Santiago, Chile, Sydney, Australia and Tel Aviv.

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 with honors from Princeton in 1983.

Jamie also serves on the Board of the Storefront for Art and Architecture, chairs the boards of the Skyscraper Museum and the Urban Design Forum, and is a trustee of Bard College.

FIRM BRIEF Operating as one firm with six global offices, KPF (kpf.com) is one of the world's premier architecture firms with approximately 600 staff members from 42 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. More than 100 of the firm's completed projects are certified, or pursuing, green certification.

What is the key to the strength of KPF's architectural practice and how does it maintain its leadership in the field?

In over 40 years of practice, our firm has established a remarkable body of work, some of the world's most distinguished examples of large-scale architecture, projects that have shaped major cities including New York, Washington, London, Paris, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Seoul. I would argue that KPF has created one of the most powerful models of collaborative practice in the history of our profession. I'm convinced that the key to our success lies in our culture of collaboration and respect.



The Lotte Tower in Seoul

The firm operates as a meritocracy, in which the best ideas rise to the top, and individual talents are given a chance to contribute at the highest level. It is absolutely essential that opportunities are given equally to all, regardless of gender, culture, race, age or persuasion. To draw disproportionately from one group would be to miss out on the potential of talent available to us, and to violate a principle of fairness. The unusually high level of dedication that our

architects devote to their work can only exist in a setting in which they can count on a climate of mutual respect.

The strength of our practice starts with a deep dedication to the mission of design. The founders of our firm, and those who joined them soon after the firm's inception, had studied and worked with great modern architects including Louis Kahn, I.M. Pei, Marcel Breuer, Paul Rudolph and Rafael Moneo. We still look to these sources for inspiration.

We've made a priority of giving elegant form to large complex functions, while paying attention to the rigorous demands of construction and the marketplace. The only way to do this effectively was to bring architecture together with the forces of commerce. This became the firm's ethos.

What makes our firm special today is our ability to bring innovative design to large-scale projects. In our field, size and quality are often seen as inversely proportional. On the contrary, we find it especially exciting to bring the ideals of elevated design to such building types as tall towers, sprawling markets, airport terminals, new towns, whole campuses and mixed-use urban clusters. These types of projects bring tough challenges, often at a scale at which it is difficult to perfect every detail, but they are tremendously important. We make it our mission to execute our projects with technical thoroughness and functional intelligence, building them well, and building them to last.

How critical is it that your culture remains consistent, especially in an environment where you're in competition with celebrity architects for projects?

The term "celebrity architect" is something of a misnomer. Some architects who are celebrated in one part of the world are unknown in others. Celebrity value varies with context. For a variety of reasons, KPF is often considered to have that caché in China and in other parts of Asia. That being said, I understand the draw. Single name firms can carry with them a connotation of the individual genius. For better or for worse, it's harder to create that sense of mystique with a group firm.

Our belief is that collaboration, the collective effort of a like-minded group, can often achieve more than any single source firm. Collaboration is responsible for some of the greatest achievements of our time, including information technology, space exploration, and advances in medical treatment. Just read Isaacson's book on the great innovators. Perhaps it's something of an American phenomenon. In the U.S., we believe in teamwork, community initiatives, group research projects, etc. This may be why our country boasts so many of the world's greatest research universities, Nobel Prize winners and business innovations. Collaboration has also produced such architectural achievements as Rockefeller Center.

At KPF we work very hard to maintain the sense of broad-based participation in design. We avoid over-emphasizing individual authorship, and ask that each individual shares credit with his or her teammates. There is a tremendous work ethic in the firm, arising more from ambition and desire than from a sense of obligation. Each architect wants his or her team's project to stand out as the smartest, most inventive, best looking building in the studio; of course, while appreciating and gleaning inspiration from the work being done around them. They realize that this cannot be achieved by individuals. While often over-used, the team sport analogy fits. An individual cannot win in a game of soccer, basketball or ice hockey. It's the same with building projects of such size and complexity. Teamwork can produce results of great originality, and ultimately achieve its own sort of "celebrity."

Our clients can identify easily with this group dynamic. They themselves are often similarly structured. When clients see and experience the synergies between a young designer, a more mature partner, a technical draftsman, a creative delineator of space, and so on, they understand that the building comes to life due to the efforts of many people working together.

Of course, there are building types and specific commissions that are best awarded to single name practices. We appreciate and applaud those choices. They often inspire us and spur us on. Fortunately, there is enough work to go around, and we can all contribute to our urban culture.

Do you feel that the impact of architecture is broadly appreciated?

I think that good buildings are appreciated in an intuitive way by most people, but few take the time to understand architecture's fundamental importance to our society. Of course, the awareness of architectural value varies in different parts of the world, in different cities and in different eras.

In our practice, we appreciate how entire neighborhoods are affected by large-scale



Covent Garden in London

buildings. We see neighborhoods ruined or enhanced over time depending on the thoughtfulness devoted to new construction. Part of this discussion involves the awareness of historical surroundings. Without understanding the broader context of the city, we can't contribute effectively to the larger urban amalgam in which we are working.

Communicating the value of design is one of the architect's most important challenges. It's part of our job to advocate effectively, sometimes educating others about our intentions, and remembering to remain self-critical in the process. Our audiences range from clients to public officials, to construction companies to journalists, to the general public. In one case, in the process of designing a new town, we found ourselves giving stump speeches to citizen groups over the course of more than eight years. In such situations, we need to build our case carefully, balancing inspiration with research, so that the users can understand both the aesthetic intent and such goals as economic and environmental efficiency.

We are fortunate to be working with some well-educated and savvy clients who are already well aware of what makes good architecture. In the best cases, clients will act as clever editors of our work, and push us to make it better. They often bring to the table a deep knowledge of functional mechanics, construction practices, neighborhood dynamics, and more. At best, the client and architect come together to make a collaborative team. We've benefited from this kind of teamwork, especially in cases in which we have worked together with clients on multiple projects. Over time, the architect-client team can build up a kind of momentum that can lead to great achievements.

How would you define KPF's sweet spot in terms of building type, and how broad are the firm's capabilities?

If you wander through our studio, you see an amazing range of scales and building

types, from a single storefront or even a light fixture to the plan of a new city or neighborhood. We have designed airports, business schools, bus stations, and houses, as well as hotels, office towers, museums and residential complexes. Yet to say that we can do anything and everything doesn't aptly describe our mission. We feel we need to focus in order to make progress and to motivate ourselves to be excellent within each use category. For each of these building types, we have developed an attitude based on years of experience. Our goal is to innovate by advancing the strategy of each typology in some new direction.

When it comes to scale, our sweet spot is somewhere between a building and a city. In such diverse projects such as

Roppongi Hills in Tokyo, the Jing An Kerry Center in Shanghai, Hudson Yards in New York and Covent Garden in London, individual buildings combine with spaces around them to form what we call urban fabric. Multiple buildings come together to form a coherent piece of the city. Our projects in such varied places as Mexico, Vancouver, Sydney and Tel Aviv manifest a set of values about how architecture can shape cities and influence urban life.

A big part of our work involves the creation of public space. We start to see the open areas around buildings, and between buildings, as primary. Building forms are tuned to encourage people to use space in ways that enhance their lives, allowing them to meet others, to shop, to relax and to be energized by the surprises of interesting experiences.

It is my belief that great spaces are best shaped by buildings that embody craft. We all respond to beautiful surroundings formed by colors, textures and materials that are put together with care and intelligence. Very few firms take on assignments of such large scale and still manage to maintain such a high level of material quality. Maintaining a sense of joy in crafting details is one of the consistent goals of our work.

When one enters a KPF building, are there certain elements that are consistent or is each project customized for the local market?

Within the firm, we sometimes don't see that consistency because we're so close to our work. We have a rule here that each project is supposed to go one step further in comparison to other projects that we have achieved in the past. Evolving our architecture is a point of pride among the designers. Each individual and each team wants to show what he or she is doing to move us forward in our thinking. We distinctly avoid insisting on maintaining any orthodoxy of style or planning strategy. This allows us to innovate.

On the other hand, when we talk to our clients, we can see that they invariably notice that there is some quality to the feeling and proportion of a KPF building. There are certain materials that are used frequently in our work. If we were to put the pictures of our projects in a gallery along with other buildings, and ask an uninitiated audience which were ours, they would probably be able to identify more than three quarters of the buildings that we've designed. This is because many of us have worked together for quite a while now. We have emerged from the same kind of background and culture where, by osmosis, we've learned techniques and ideas from each other. We're inspired by this loose sense of a "school of KPF."

Given the global scope of your business, have you opened offices in new markets?

We started with the idea that we could work in many parts of the world without having offices everywhere. We strongly resisted having any sort of franchise arrangement, where we might plant the brand and allow it to grow independently. We wanted to maintain the integrity of a design culture that would flourish in one place.

However, as our work began to grow in scale and complexity, we began to realize the scale of these projects demanded that we coordinate and communicate in a practical way with people working on sites in faraway locales such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, Seoul and London. This required that we set up multiple offices.

There is also a matter of culture. After practicing for over 10 or 20 years in a foreign land, it started to feel like home. We became close to our fellow local architects, our clients and city planners, as well as developed an appreciation of the literature, history, weather patterns and flora of the places where we were working. At that point it seemed only natural to selectively open up local offices.

The other thing is that our staff, those who make the firm productive, are very diverse in their cultural and national origins. Even in our New York office, at some point in our history, we counted more architects who were born in Seoul than were born in New York City.

We're a broad collection of talented individuals who have somehow gravitated towards one another. Invariably, when we're asked to look at a project, even in a part of the world where we haven't practiced before, someone in the office comes from that area. At that point, we realize that we're not really foreign architects.

Even within the New York office, our population is a kind of United Nations. We consist of groups of architects who understand and are motivated by the history of the cities they grew up in. Our staff is an international, multivalent collection of people.

continuing. Sketching or drawing allows one, in the space of a minute, to come up with 10 different ideas and to throw them away without any feeling of futility or waste.

As someone deeply involved in One Vanderbilt, how do you define the impact of that development?

We're very fortunate to be involved with two of Manhattan's greatest current projects: Hudson Yards and One Vanderbilt. One will change the West Side forever, the other will transform East Midtown. While I'm equally proud of both projects, my own efforts have focused on One Vanderbilt.

When I started working with SL Green on the design in 2012, along with my partners Gene Kohn, Bill Pedersen and Trent Tesch, there was no precedent in Midtown for such a concentration of density. We developed the concept design along with city planners of the Bloomberg admin-

istration, in particular Amanda Burden and Edith Hsu Chen. The goal was to rejuvenate a part of the city whose place as the leading CBD in the world had been compromised by tired building stock. Just as important was the goal of complementing Grand Central Terminal with an adjoining office tower whose base would be substantially devoted to public use.

Since the approval of this scheme, which SL Green CEO Marc Holliday championed with the forceful intensity of cool logic, the rest of East Midtown has seen a burst of development. What allowed this to happen was a remarkable deal between a private developer and city government. When I travel around the world and explain this case to planners and builders in Asia and Europe, they are amazed by the scale and success of this public-private partnership.

As architects for this tower, we are tremendously proud of doing our part. Even the steel structure, now just 10 stories out of the ground, expresses the gutsy intent of the basic design, to transform the densest building of private enterprise – a high rise office tower – into the most open expression of public inclusion. Our building, perhaps more important than being the tallest office tower in Midtown, will connect directly to Grand Central, relieving it of the pressures of doubled ridership due to east-side access. Our role here goes beyond architecture. We are taking part in a historic act of city building. ●



One Vanderbilt rising adjacent to Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan

Is it important for students coming out of school today to still be able to take a pen to paper?

I believe it's tremendously important and, personally, I take great pleasure in drawing. That's partly because I'm a bit of a dinosaur, one of the last remaining architects in the group who isn't using the computer except to look at drawings. Sketching by hand is still the fastest and most profound way to connect the brain to real space, because the feedback is instant. There is an element of emotion and a feeling that comes from the hand.

I still ask staff, especially younger staff, to sketch their ideas even though they might not have been required to do so to get through school. The results are wonderful because most architects have that skill somewhere in their background. Most of us grew up drawing. It's a wonderful thing to see a younger colleague get an idea out on paper. This means it will see the light of day early on and won't languish as a tacit assumption.

Many of the better designs happen not because of any kind of linear process of thinking in which one starts with a design and takes steps to move with certainty toward that end. Instead, the design process often involves going into the dark, wandering around and stumbling, and only then realizing one has arrived somewhere that was not anticipated.

Sometimes, it's only by making the mistakes or exploring the dead ends that one finds a solution that really merits