

Building a Firm for the Future



KPF projects - One Vanderbilt (above) and Hudson Yards (opposite page)

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

EDITORS' NOTE On July 4, 1976, A. Eugene Kohn founded Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF), alongside William Pedersen and Sheldon Fox, 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 Bachelor of Architecture 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, after graduation, remained in the Reserve for another five years, retiring 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.



A. Eugene Kohn

As someone who has long been a leader within the industry, how do you define the key characteristics that make a great architecture firm?

I would start with what the firm produces – that is key and has to be well-done. Ultimately, the firm is judged by the buildings and planning it has done, the spaces they have created and if they have, through their work, improved the quality of life for people and made the city or countryside a more enjoyable experience.

Second is about how the partners get along. If it's a real team effort, they're helping each other and care more about the firm, the client, and the project than about their own egos. Therefore, they will work well with each other and this can be seen instantly in how they collaborate and relate.

When Bill, Shelly, and I started the firm, clients would tell us that it was unusual to see how well we got along and that we seemed like one person. The three of us combined to become one because we did get along – we had great respect and fondness for each other. This doesn't mean we always agreed, but we were able to settle disagreements because we cared about doing the right thing for the client and the firm and helping each other succeed.

Bill and I are still very close (Shelly passed away in 2006) and our relationship is so effective because we have great respect and admiration for the work the other does.

For us, and for me in particular as someone who really wanted to create this firm, collaboration and teamwork are the most important things. I wanted people to work together and contribute, to build a great firm, to do great work for clients and to be proud of the projects we produced. Like in sports, great teams play well together and win. It's not about the individual.

Has that collaborative culture become harder to find today in the industry?

Yes. The press likes to focus on what are now called celebrity architects. Bill and I have received this focus a number of times, but I'm part of a team – I'm a leader who tries to be inspirational and who tries to build teamwork, and I'm more concerned about that than my own glorification.

One well-known architect has a photographer follow him everywhere to take pictures in order to get it out to the press about what he's doing. Many architects are concerned about their images.

Paul Katz (former KPF President and Managing Principal who passed away in 2014) and I were in Las Vegas for the opening of a project and two of the architects had PR people who work for them full time and travel with them wherever they go. Paul and I had none of that. Maybe we should have?

This doesn't mean that we're right and they're wrong, but they were very concerned about their individual images. There are many talented celebrity architects and their success is still influenced on the team that works with them.

As KPF has grown in size and scale, has maintaining a collaborative culture become more difficult?

We have 30 partners now and still have that collaboration. This is who we are as a firm. Collaboration at all levels continues some 42 years later. It starts at the top, within the leadership of the firm. James von Klemperer is currently our President (he is doing an outstanding job) and works closely with me as Chairman and our Board of Directors, which includes Nick Dunn, Richard Nemeth and Robert Whitlock, as well as senior input from Bill Pedersen and Bill Louie who sit in on the Board meetings.

Will you still hire a talented architect even if they do not fit into the KPF culture?

No, because they need to be a part of the team. If they want to be loners and work for themselves, they might as well start their own firms.

Working together doesn't mean that one doesn't have their own ideas and can't convince others about how to approach the problem. Some are better than others at presenting to clients because they have better personalities for doing that.

However, all of our 30 partners are fantastic at what they do, but they don't all do the same thing – some are designers who are outspoken and give fantastic presentations; others are very talented designers who are more shy in terms of getting up in front of the public, but in working with the team and the board, they are excellent. They can all learn to present and we make sure they do, because there is no question that being a great presenter is valuable.

If we go up against one of the celebrity architects and they can present well, which they usually can, they could win over our collaboration because some clients love being identified with an individual, which I can understand. Some people want to say they work with a specific person who is great rather than a great team. We can't please everyone.

FIRM BRIEF Operating as one firm with six global offices, KPF (kpf.com) is one of the world's premier architecture firms with over 600 staff members from numerous countries, together speaking a collective 40+ languages. The firm's diverse portfolio comprises corporate headquarters, investment office buildings, hospitality, academic, medical, research, civic, museum, transportation, airports, bus and train stations, 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.

There is a lot of talent that doesn't have the courage to speak out and to pound their own chest – they are shy or humble, but extremely talented. They do great work, so we have a firm that can allow for that because we cover each other.

When clients see the work we do and how thoughtful, sensitive and enjoyable we are to work with they come to trust us and want to collaborate with us.

How important is creating a sense of place and improving the community when developing your projects?

In the end, what we're trying to create is a quality of life and a better place to be. If we are commissioned to do a building, we want to do it as sensitively as we can.

An architect needs to be sensitive to the community around them. While they can't necessarily totally change the environment with one building, they want the building to be sensitive to what is already there or upgrade what is there so that others might follow suit.

Are there certain characteristics that define a KPF building?

Many people tell me they can identify our buildings, which has to do with many aspects of the architecture, from possibly the form, choice of materials, detailing, respect for the neighbors, maximizing the opportunity of the site – maybe just the concept and its execution.

There have been some architects who didn't worry about how something was constructed, but rather about the idea behind it. However, in ten years or so, those buildings were coming apart.

For me, a great piece of architecture is one that has a lasting quality because it's not only well conceived and well thought out, but well detailed and constructed, so it will survive. The choice of materials and detail give it a long life.

Looking at landmark buildings today, it's obvious how well they were put together.

It was much easier when Bill Pedersen and a few others were just designing for us. I worked closely with Bill and particularly with programmed buildings, his thought process and organization of the building could be detected.

With 30 partners, of which around 12 are designers, how do we keep that KPF consistency? That is a big problem but most, if not all, of our designs are very sensitive to how we work and think, and to the choice of materials and detail. They are influenced by each other, much to my joy and they are still creating KPF buildings. We have so many amazing young partners at KPF.

From the day you created KPF, how important was it to build a firm that had longevity?

Bill, Shelly and I said that one of the things we most wanted to accomplish was to create a firm where young people could come out of school, work with us, learn from us and, one day, become the partners and leaders of a firm that would continue to have a bright future.

The people we picked were supposed to be as good as or better than us. Some leaders in other companies choose people who aren't as good so they can control them. Our goal was to pick people we thought were not only as good, but who may be better, than us. That's one way to make the firm better, and we have done that.

How broad are the project capabilities for KPF?

We have done every building type there is, from an individual house to a factory to a small

office building to some of the world's tallest office towers, research laboratories, hospitals, schools, museums, airports, train stations and bus terminals – every building type. While the building type is important, one thing I learned from day one is that the key to success is having a good client. We still turn down work with a poor client. A good client makes us look good.

Are you surprised to see the growth and development that is taking place in certain parts of New York City?

The biggest surprise for me is what Hudson Yards is doing for the West Side, and not just physically but in attracting the tenants it has – that people would be willing to break from Midtown or the East Side or Downtown and go across to the Hudson where transportation wasn't as good and where it certainly wasn't traditionally the site of



office buildings. This is quite a surprise. However, that whole area has changed and the impact on the city is enormous. I give credit for this great accomplishment to (former) Mayor Bloomberg, Amanda Burden and Stephen Ross at Related, as well as credit to KPF as we did the masterplan of all of Related's Hudson Yards and designed four buildings and the decks over the tracks.

With KPF's international growth, do you need to have physical offices in these regions?

We started by trying to do everything out of New York, in particular the design, but that wasn't possible. We realized early on in London that they would not work for us if we didn't have a full-service office.

The only two offices that we currently design from are New York and London, but we do have offices in Abu Dhabi, where we're designing the airport – we have 60 people there working on this project. We also just won the Changi Airport Terminal 5 in Singapore and the client required that we have an office there. In Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Seoul, Korea, where we also have offices, they tend to focus on following through with the projects. However, the design still originates in New York and London. That could change over time if the need to design locally increases. I would not rule out that one day we will be designing out of other offices.

What are the keys for a young architect to build a sustainable career today?

What one learns in school gets you the job, but once you get the job, you have to learn how to

be an architect. Schools tend to emphasize design, which is good, and to teach some of the technical issues and create a general awareness of the history of architecture and construction. One also gets exposed to great architects who teach. I was lucky to be exposed at Penn to many great architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Paul Rudolf, Lou Kahn, Walter Gropius, Ian McHarg and G. Holmes Perkins. School opens one's eyes and mind to what is possible, but you are not able to practice architecture in school – you have to join a firm and hone your craft.

Are schools still teaching the value of drawing and putting pen to paper?

I always have a pencil in my hand – that is how I was taught. Today, people use the computer like a pencil and it's easy for them. I could not work that way.

The computer allows one to do things you couldn't do before. When we were young architects, we had to see in our mind's eye what we wanted to draw and we would draw it. We didn't have a screen – we had to visualize and draw it. That was great because we could be very creative within ourselves.

The old-timers still sketch today, but not the young people. I do think it's a mistake not to teach drawing as well as handwriting or lettering. There are young people whose writing and lettering I cannot read. Some schools require the first year or two of drawing and then switch to the computer for the remainder of the years.

How valuable has it been to build such a diverse workforce that has a global view?

Diversity has made this country great and makes our firm great. We have more than 40 languages spoken here. Unfortunately, I don't know any of them.

The quality of the work and the beauty of the drawings that they still do by hand and on the computer is terrific and we learn from each other. We're a much better firm because of this.

Each culture brings a unique ideology to the challenge and this enriches the product. It makes America great when a diverse group of people bring in different ideas and cultures to add to the richness of the country – same with a school or a firm.

How do you define effective leadership?

Leadership is very important and I was exposed to leadership as a young man. I served in the Navy for three years of active duty after my undergraduate work and remained on reserve duty for another five years after graduate school and ended up with the rank of Lieutenant Commander. I also taught leadership in the Navy during my reserve period.

Shelly Fox was in the Army and we graduated in the same school year, so we came back together, and we had the same basic skills of decision-making and leadership. I can make a decision examining both the positives and the negatives in a very short time.

In the military, we were forced to learn that the timeliness of a decision is critical. If one makes the right decision but delays it, it's the wrong decision. Not making a decision is the worst option as it paralyzes the organization. Even a decision made by just looking at one side of the coin is not going to be the right answer. Leaders should be inspirational, getting the best from their people who in turn will respect them, do the right thing and give their best. It makes me proud to watch young people grow and become really terrific at what they're doing. It gives me joy to see the firm grow and design outstanding buildings that bring joy to the users and great results to the organization. ●