

# Communication and Collaboration

An Interview with A. Eugene Kohn, Chairman, and James von Klemperer, President and Design Principal, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates

**EDITORS' NOTE** On July 4, 1976, A. Eugene Kohn founded Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF) in New York City, 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.

James von Klemperer is President and Design Principal at Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates where he began 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 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.



A. Eugene Kohn



James von Klemperer

Von Klemperer 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, von Klemperer 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, Tel Aviv and Sydney, Australia.

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 M.Arch with honors from Princeton in 1983.

Von Klemperer 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 nine offices in eight countries, KPF ([kpf.com](http://kpf.com)) is one of the world's premier architecture firms with over 650 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 LEED designated, or pursuing, green certification.

**The world is facing an unprecedented crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?**

*Von Klemperer:* Your question gets to the heart of our current crisis. We now rely on each other more than ever, and realize how we depend on the kindness and courage of others. My friends who are doctors on the front lines in Boston and New York, two of the worst hit cities, are showing their true commitment to public service. And those who are doing more basic jobs of sanitizing and delivering food are also heroes. I hope we can fully appreciate those who are sacrificing their safety for the common good. They are indeed leaders.

**KPF is a company that has a long culture and commitment around community engagement and addressing societal need. What do you see as the role that KPF can play in waging this battle?**

*Von Klemperer:* First, we need to support our own community, our own employees. We are committed to following the science and staying safe, doing our part not to spread the virus. We were one of the first architectural offices to vacate our premises, partly because our offices in Shanghai and Hong Kong were more than a month ahead of us in the cycle. We had already learned from their protocols. Fortunately, we've been able to keep full employment.

Now, as we look ahead to as much as a year of COVID-19 related challenges, we're determined to help keep our part of the economy going. We continue to inspect construction sites for our major projects, as we can't let our society grind to a complete halt.

**KPF was built with an entrepreneurial spirit and an ability to be nimble and adapt. How is KPF addressing its business during this time in order to succeed in this difficult environment?**

*Von Klemperer:* Our strategy for adapting nimbly to the current challenges is related to our global structure. We've made up for any operational difficulties or market weaknesses by moving tasks from one office to another. We act as one worldwide collective, supporting each other through these difficulties. When some

projects stopped in the U.S., we doubled down on our China practice. So far, we've found more than enough good work by searching every corner of the world.

**How have KPF's employees changed the way they work in order to be effective with the changes that have been necessary for all businesses to make during this crisis?**

*Von Klemperer:* First, the way of working in Zoom has allowed us to forge new internal team relationships. We review each others drawings more frequently, and do more mentoring of young staff, because we have continuous access to each others' screens. We do more now to cross the boundaries between junior and senior staff than ever before.

With all of this intensity of continuous workflow, one thing we need to be careful about is burnout. To avoid this, we've called for mandatory vacations and days off. We go from working at home, to vacationing at home!

**There is a great deal of discussion about businesses reopening in a "new normal." What is your outlook for what this new normal may look like and how is KPF preparing for the next stage in this crisis?**

*Von Klemperer:* We have to stay super flexible. As with our national predicament, our company has to be prepared to react to health data rather than setting policies based on hope. We are prepared to change our approach as the infection numbers fluctuate. We've definitely increased our firmwide communication so that everyone is fully informed at all times. We hold town halls every week, and routinely check in on the general health of our junior staff.

**KPF was built on collaboration and a culture of working together and partnership. How do you maintain this culture during a time when the workforce is working from home and isolating?**

*Von Klemperer:* One reason that KPF has weathered the storm well thus far is that we've historically placed a huge importance on collaboration. Many of our staff have worked together for decades, and we understand each other instinctively. The challenge is training junior staff, some of whom have never actually seen our office. It's best to see all of this as a creative challenge. The crisis won't last forever, but we may well be working remotely in some form for 18 months or more. We have to embrace the new normal, see the good in it, and follow the mantra: communicate, communicate, communicate.

**How proud are you to see how KPF's workforce has risen during this most difficult time and what do you say to your team about their perseverance and resilience?**

*Kohn:* I'm extremely proud of our associates, principals, and staff. They have done an amazing job these past few months – adapting seamlessly to working remotely, while continuing to provide our clients with our best service. We had the advantage of testing these new procedures in our Asian offices where the virus hit

first. So when the pandemic came to the U.S., we were prepared. It also helped that we had already developed a culture of flexibility with teams of people who are incredibly talented. When you have the right people you can do almost anything. Our staff has shown its best this year.



One Vanderbilt

**Leading companies in all industries have changed the way they operate and have been engaged in providing talent, resources and supplies to those on the front lines of this crisis. This has provided an example of the role that business plays as a force for good in society. Will you discuss your views on the responsibility that leading companies have to address societal need?**

*Kohn:* When the number of Covid-19 hospitalizations was rising rapidly at the start of the crisis, we immediately programmed our 3D printers to produce face shields for doctors and nurses in front-line positions. We did this in conjunction with other design firms and schools of architecture, so it has had a real impact. Our principals and associates are also active with a broad range of nonprofits and civic organizations which have been greatly affected by this crisis. For example, I am chairman of the board of Publicolor, a stay-in-school youth development program that engages high-risk kids. The program is remarkably successful – all of the kids in it now graduate from high school and more than half of them graduate from college. It has been incredibly busy during the pandemic, providing meals and tutoring while schools have been closed. Hana Kassem, one of our younger principals, was recently named to the Mayor's Advisory Council on Reopening New York City after COVID-19 and will be an important voice in making sure our city is reshaped in ways that make it work better for all of its residents. Before the virus hit, KPF had done work for the New York City Housing Authority, developing a sustainability and resiliency master plan for one of the largest public housing projects in the country. We've been engaged with issues of affordable housing and environmental justice for years now.

**KPF is a global company and has a long history operating in China. Are you concerned about the current state of U.S.-China relations and how critical is it for the U.S. and China to work closely together to effectively address global challenges?**

*Kohn:* Yes, I'm concerned about the current status of the U.S.-China relationship. I don't think the rhetoric from political leaders these days is helping the situation. KPF has been involved with China for 30 years and we've seen how the exchange of ideas, goods, and services during that time has made both countries stronger and improved the lives of millions of people. Are there aspects of that relationship that could be improved? Sure. But as Colin Powell said about China during a recent interview, we don't have enemies, we have problems and we just need to start solving them.

**China's economy has been one of the first to restart from the pandemic and businesses are currently operating throughout China. Will you discuss KPF's current operations in China and how important it is for global companies to have a positive business relationship with China?**

*Kohn:* We're extremely busy in China and have fantastic clients there who give us the opportunity to do great architecture. As you note, China is one of the first countries to restart its economy and we are seeing the benefits of that. Our offices in Shanghai and Hong Kong are operating at full capacity and aren't slowing down. We do a lot of design work for our China projects from New York and London, so projects in Asia keep us going here too. At several points during the past 30 years, China has provided ballast when the economic waters have gotten choppy – for example in the early '90s and again after the financial crisis of 2008. China has 1.4 billion people and the second largest economy in the world. We can't just walk away from this part of the world. We need to stay engaged.

**You are known to be an optimistic person. During this difficult and uncertain time, what are you telling your people and what would you say to young people across the country who are deeply concerned and scared about the future?**

*Kohn:* I know it's a difficult moment right now and a lot of people are suffering. The pandemic has revealed to us problems in our society that have been there for a long time. We can no longer ignore how poverty, racism, huge disparities in wealth, and a patchwork health-care system weaken all of us. But I also think this gives us the opportunity to make things better. Yes, I'm an optimist, and I think we'll learn from what we're going through. The U.S. has gone through hard times before – the Great Depression, World War II, the polio epidemic, and the fight for civil rights in the '60s – and has emerged stronger each time. I think we can become stronger this time too. I challenge young architects to be part of the movement to make that happen. If they do that, they'll have exciting and rewarding careers as designers and make the country a better place. ●