

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly

Cultural
Connections



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A look inside a culture-rich firm offers insight into the power of people, connection, obstacles overcome, and pleasant surprises.

DesignIntelligence (DI): You have a unique role within your firm. You also benefit from a recent strategic firm re-focusing.

Caroline Braga (CB): We restructured Sasaki's governance two years ago to include a CEO and board of directors, which includes my role as chair of firm culture. We also completed a strategic plan that unites the firm's different practice areas, and each practice group developed a specific mission and goals in line with the firm's.

DI: How has that helped your response to the Covid -19 pandemic?

CB: It's been helpful to have clear goals as we make decisions that will change how we work now, and likely how we will work in the future. Our CEO, James Miner, has also played a central role as we have responded to the pandemic. It's been helpful to have someone dedicated to managing the crisis full-time. From a cultural perspective, he's been the consistent voice presenting a clear and

hopefully reassuring message to our community. He's been sending out a daily email to the entire firm, which combines official company announcements with tidbits shared with him by other Sasakians. These messages have ranged from announcements about our finances and remote work plan, to personal stories and links to interesting news articles. There has been something reassuring about knowing that email is coming, even if it may contain difficult news. He's probably asking himself what he's gotten himself into, as he is now on daily message #44!

DI: How have you coped to stay connected and be productive?

CB: In keeping with Sasaki's collective culture, we have responded to this crisis by conducting a lot of meetings! We are currently holding weekly HR meetings, biweekly board meetings, monthly stockholder meetings, and monthly all-company meetings to make timely decisions and keep everyone informed. It's a lot of Zooming, but making sure that



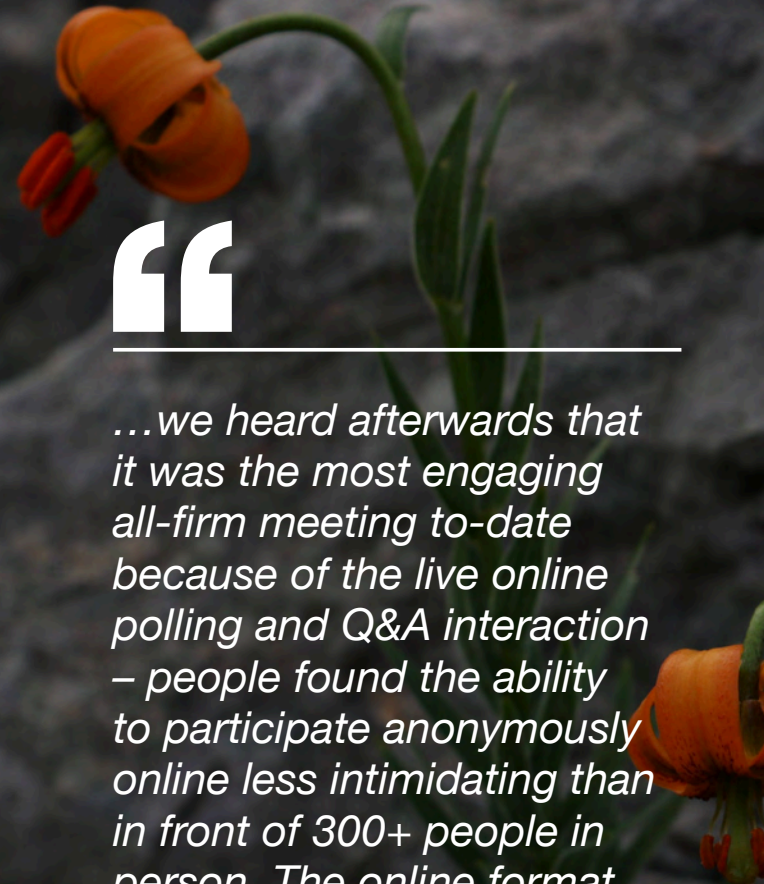
all Sasakians know what the plan is as it evolves, and have a chance to ask questions, has been an important part of helping us all move forward together.

We have also been trying to continue our usual gatherings and traditions virtually to provide as much of a sense of normalcy as is possible. Our practice group socials most definitely continue, our Sustainability In Practice (SIP) blog has been going out, our Earth Day celebration happened online, and we hosted an artists' reception for the opening of a new exhibition in the Sasaki lobby, only staged

in virtual space! I am currently planning our next new employee welcome party, a quarterly onboarding event, for the unfortunate people who joined the firm between January and March this year.

A good example of adaption is that rather than postponing our Q1 quarterly meeting, which was scheduled to occur just as we were getting into working from home, we hosted it as a massive online meeting. We included an all-staff interactive polling activity, where we asked staff about what COVID-19 would mean for our practice, as well as for design of the physical environment at large. It was fun to see the range of creative answers we got. We closed the meeting with an interactive panel with several firm leaders, who picked up on some of the threads raised by staff in the poll in a live discussion. It was inspiring to come together to think beyond our immediate tactical needs to envision positive outcomes that we could contribute to. We also included an anonymous Q&A session using the zoom chat function, so staff could submit questions to the CEO, who answered them live.

DI: That's impressive you were able to pull that off. I love the surprise in getting that kind of feedback. You might think technology is less effective than being face-to-face, but it yielded some unexpected benefits.



...we heard afterwards that it was the most engaging all-firm meeting to-date because of the live online polling and Q&A interaction – people found the ability to participate anonymously online less intimidating than in front of 300+ people in person. The online format actually helped people speak up - we didn't expect that!

CB: Technology has been absolutely critical as we try to stay connected, keep project work moving ahead, and win new work.

We rolled out Slack the first week we were working from home, which was a little crazy. Slack allows for a continuous back and forth discussion, similar to what happens informally in the office within teams. It records a continuous thread of collaboration that you can refer back to, and allows for easy file sharing. There were some lessons learned from that rollout – while some people were instantly up and running, happy to have a new tool, others resented being asked to learn a new technology in the middle of a

crisis! We were definitely learning on the fly how best to support everyone.

Following the Slack rollout, I collaborated with Sasaki's Chief Technology Officer, Holly St. Clair, and VR master David Morgan, on a Sasaki guide to remote work. It includes tech tips on Zoom, Slack, and other technology, as well as cultural best practices to help people manage their remote work-life balance, which is challenging in different way than regular office work-life balance!

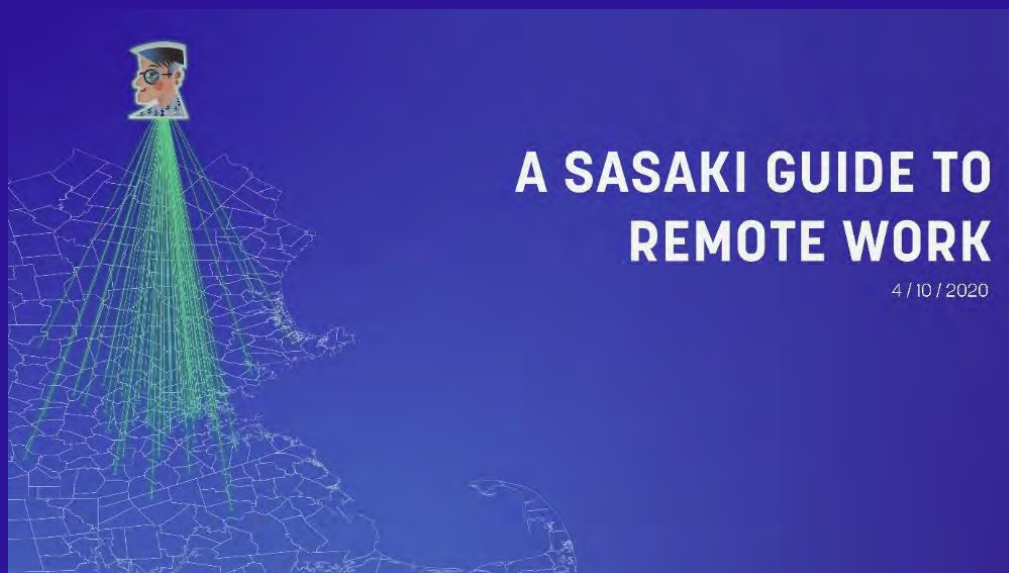
Holly and team then conducted a survey to collect input on how remote working is going for our staff, to see how we can best support their needs going forward.

DI: What have you learned about caring for and retaining talent as a result of Covid-19? What strategies will you employ to make the best of things once we return to a new normal?

CB: The strain of remote work is emphasizing the need to support wellness across the firm. People are experiencing a variety of stresses, from too much kid time during work time to too much alone time.

To try to provide some relief, we're adapting our existing cultural practices to the media we have available. Our lunchtime yoga classes and "younger next year" fitness classes still happen twice a week, only online now vs. in the office. We are encouraging people to schedule team lunches or happy hours on Zoom, as well as meetings with their advocate, even if those meetings are now less about professional development and more about making sure everyone is doing okay.

We already had a flex-work policy, which allows employees to negotiate their hours in the office with their teams, but few people had previously asked to work entirely remotely. I expect once we're able to be back in the office (and schools and daycares are open) we'll see a greater percent of the office making this choice, whether part or full time, now that remote work has been significantly





de-bugged. The better we master remote work now, the better we will be able to meet our staff's diverse needs later.

DI: You've had some positive outcomes from this forced change. Any epiphanies or profound moments?

CB: We hope the experience of remote work will dramatically improve for working parents once daycares and schools reopen, making it an option we can more confidently offer to those who would like it. It would be a big win if our improved work-from-home ability would help us retain working parents.

We've also lost staff in the past who wanted to move back home to be closer to family, or ecologists to the pull of less urban locales. Perhaps in the future, we could keep them all on, even if they live in the mountains or across the country!

DI: How has your staff reacted? Are expectations changing? Any heroic acts, shining lights, exemplary leadership, or creative leaps in this time of crisis?

CB: Lots of small heroic acts are taking place across the firm. When quarantine began, there was a quota on how many laptops people could buy, because companies were all rushing to do it at once, so our IT team pretended to buy five computers each individually on

behalf of the firm to make sure people could work effectively at home. Our IT team was also working crazy overtime hours to be available to help people address VPN, Revit or other technology crises, and to plan out our next round of investment in technology.

I spilled tea on my laptop the first week we were home, had a minor panic attack, and tried to revive it with a hairdryer. When that didn't work, one of our IT team members met me at the office to triage my machine, and I was back up and working within 2 hours. They are awesome.

DI: Have you seen any impacts on design process?

CB: The biggest challenge has been drawing together. We're testing a range of technologies to better enable this core function.

Another challenge of remote work is that while experienced staff can run without direction, entry level staff need and deserve more frequent, hands-on guidance to advance the work. Good communication and good management is even more important than it was before.

DI: What about impacts on clients, partners, or consultants?

CB: In a funny way, the unplanned intimacy of Zoom meetings has been positive for building relationships with clients and consultants. Seeing into one another's home lives seems to reduce barriers and make it easier connect with people on a personal level. That foundation helps to build a strong working relationship, where you truly feel like partners grappling with new challenges together.

DI: Another unanticipated consequence: You're getting to know your colleagues better than you did before because you're seeing inside their homes, personal effects, dogs and kids

CB: Not only our colleagues. Our clients. Our consultants. Everyone's in -- maybe not the same boat, but some kind of weird boat they weren't in before!

DI: Small moments of delight.

CB: I'm enjoying the Slack social channels that have been popping up. Lots of kid pics, pet pics, home office set-ups, home crafts, recipe sharing etc. It's a nice way to understand where everybody is - literally and figuratively. I noticed the other day that someone started a Tiger King channel...

DI: Are you considering moving to a more remote approach long term when you come back?

CB: As we go through this experience, we're all considering what we do and don't like about remote work. In addition to the complaints about Zoom fatigue and drawing remotely, I've heard parents say, "I'm tired, but I appreciate spending more time with my family." I've heard non-parents say they are cooking, eating healthily, and working out more. There are many things that most of us like about NOT commuting. So we know there are pros here that people may want to extend. That said, we are wondering if, once the pandemic ends and working remotely becomes a choice, will there still end up being more value put on in-person face time? Will the need/desire to work remotely create an unequal situation between people who have more and less flexibility to be in the office? We will definitely continue to offer remote work as an option, but we don't want to create inequity between employees. The good news is that it looks like we will have a while to figure it out as the involuntary beta test continues!

To complement the potential for more remote work, we have also talked about the need for our space to better support the activities that really work best in the office, like team collaboration, making

Sasaki social Slack channels started to date...

#social_binge-book-pod-books
 #social_eats
 #social_experinstruments
 #social_joeexotic-tigerking
 #social_happy-things
 #social_homiestations
 #social_kids
 #social_nookscranny
 #social_pets
 #social_plants-and-gardens

#social_podcasts
 #social_misfits-lounge
 #social_sasaki-garden
 #social_sip (sustainability in practice)
 #social_song-of-the-day
 #social_virtualdiner
 #social_virtual-pod
 #social_wall-of-shame
 #social_wrt (womxn's round table)
 #social_yoga



large drawings, model making, sample review for CA etc. So maybe the office will end up looking different. Maybe it will have fewer desks and more collaboration space.

DI: What about travel in the future?

Now that we've learned remote work is possible, do we really have to drive all the way into Boston for that meeting? An activity analysis may be in order to save that trip in the future.

CB: Not just driving, but flying! A lot of people in our office who routinely get on multiple planes each week to travel around the country and the globe would love to do less of that. It's tiring, it's time away from home and family, and it burns a lot of fossil fuels. We're thinking it's not all or nothing. We are imagining scenarios where we might go to a kickoff meetings, get to know a client, visit the site -- but maybe then we don't need all of the subsequent meetings to be in person.

DI: Has there been consideration given to using this crisis to reevaluate what you're doing as a firm? Has it caused you to ask: "When we go back to normal, was what we were doing okay in the first place, or is this an opportunity to revisit things?"

CB: At the Q1 meeting, Michael Grove, our chair of landscape architecture,

shared a photo of Wuhan after the quarantine was lifted. People were right back out on the street. Everyone was wearing masks, but they were mobbing the public open spaces. There's a lot of doom and gloom prediction right now, but we continue to believe in public space and are excited to be part of creating those resources for communities. We're writing a number of articles on the subject now, and hope we can find ways to be more active in advocating for public resources to be allocated to new types of green infrastructure, whether spaces for safe movement or access to wild green spaces for recreation and reflection.

DI: Has all this given rise to looking for new kinds of talent? Risk managers, scenario planners, strategists, crisis managers, researchers, or other new kinds of talent or skills?

CB: I don't think we are going to get into risk management, but we will likely

continue to develop our resiliency planning skills, which has been a growing practice area for us over the past 10 years. We have also talked about partnerships with industries that allow us to contribute what we do well - think creatively about problems from a design perspective - to more specialized teams grappling with new challenges. For example, we're not in the healthcare market, but we'd love to be part of designing healthy spaces indoors and out.

DI: Having learned more about your firm in our Design Futures Council conference, its reinvention, your role, and those of your colleagues, it seems you have a gold mine - an embarrassment of cultural riches in your firm. I commend you for that and I thank you for sharing it.

CB: Thanks for your kind words - this has been a nice opportunity to reflect.

Caroline Braga is a proven thinker, collaborator, and leader who teams with architects, planners, urban designers, and civil engineers to create beautiful and ecologically functional landscapes. She is passionate about connecting people to nature through design. Her experience spans from planning to built work, with a focus on integrated campus contexts. She brings to each project—as well as myriad corporate initiatives—strong critical thinking, a willingness to engage in thoughtful debate, and a commitment to quality. Caroline provides critical thought and design leadership for Sasaki's campus landscape and planning practice and is helping to strengthen and expand Sasaki's national presence as a campus planning and design leader. She also serves on Sasaki's board of directors as the Chair of Firm Culture and holds a master of landscape architecture from the University of Pennsylvania and a bachelor of arts from Georgetown University.

