



Q1 INFLUENCE: STEWARDSHIP

Building Stewardship



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Marianne McKenna

Founding Partner, KPMB Architects

Winner of the DI Lifetime Achievement Award, KPMB's Marianne McKenna discusses the stewardship of architecture

DesignIntelligence (DI): Your firm's work visibly connects to the idea of stewardship. How did that idea become integral to KPMB's work?

Marianne McKenna (MM): The connection between stewardship and architecture was in the zeitgeist of my experience, as well as my partners', well before we founded KPMB. My first encounter with the concept of stewardship came from a meeting early in my career with Phyllis Lambert, architect, patron of architecture and founder of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). In her inimitable straightforward style, Phyllis was protesting the destruction of heritage architecture across Canada.¹ She challenged the modernist-era belief that progress was hindered by history, that preservation guidelines limited the imaginative reuse of heritage buildings and were too costly. For her, the concept of stewardship was focused on the retention of heritage buildings, and she deplored the practice of demolishing them to accommodate expedient replacements — inferior to the ones they replaced. Her engagement in the Seagrams Building, for example, highlighted the obligation of the corporation to the citizens of a city beyond the workplace.

¹ National Trust of Canada reports: Over the past 30 years, Canada has lost 23% of its historic building stock in urban areas and 21% in rural areas. This rate of destruction is disturbing both in terms of lost heritage and increased environmental waste.

While Canada's architectural heritage was being erased in the grip of the feverish modernist agenda of "urban renewal" in the name of progress, Jack Diamond and Barton Myers arrived from Philadelphia and formed a practice in Toronto. They were the first architects in Toronto to use contemporary architecture to strategically protest the demolition of heritage by marrying old and new architecture. Their seminal project was York Square (1969). Around the same time, Jane Jacobs, author of "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (1961), also made Toronto her new home. This critical collection of new urban thinkers and designers fleeing the U.S. political climate launched an inspirational movement to revalue and preserve heritage buildings and places. It was a call to the profession to wake up and show up as stewards and good ancestors of the future, and it was what drew me to work for Barton. This is where I met my future partners, Bruce Kuwabara, Thomas Payne and Shirley Blumberg, and where the concept of stewardship and architecture took root.

One could say every project with Barton was a project of stewardship: retaining and adding to the original brick barrel house of the Seagram Distillery created the Seagram Museum, infill at the Dundas/Sherbourne project allowed retention of old housing stock while adding new units, and the reimagining of a cast-iron building on 23rd Street in New York City as the Hasbro Showrooms created a wonderfully unique venue.

When Barton decided to move his practice to Los Angeles, we formed what is now KPMB Architects. Barton entrusted us with the stewardship of two major projects: the Art Gallery of Ontario Stage III Expansion and Woodsworth College at the University of Toronto. Both involved the restoration and adaptive reuse of existing buildings of different eras.



Our work in this space of restoration and adaptive reuse was unusual for the time and it led to our first signature KPMB projects, an office building for Tudhope Associates (1989), King James Place (1992), and the Design Exchange (1994). In our youthful enthusiasm, we spoke of “building for all time,” carrying over many of the values of stewardship from our work with Barton.

DI: What does the term “stewardship” mean in your practice at KPMB? How might that manifest itself in firm systems such as design, process, recruiting, policies, culture, rewards and incentives? Do your clarity of purpose and vision differentiate your firm and its processes?

MM: From the start, we established personal and long-range goals to guide the evolution of our practice. We set our standards very high to challenge and motivate other architects, not just the people in our practice. Looking back, without articulating it, we did understand that we were stewards of the future of architecture, that the past and present inform the future and that it is not just about buildings, but it is about people.

Our form of stewardship has continued over 35 years — from our training with Barton Myers, who himself had trained with Louis Kahn, to our own practice, through mentoring in design excellence. We have always been thoughtful about the people we invite to join us in collaborative adventures to create meaningful architecture. There are roughly 50 people who have been with the firm for at least two decades and a core group from the early years. Their design intelligence and mastery of the medium of architecture is a great source of knowledge and wisdom from which we continuously draw and literally build on. We work hard to cultivate the next generation and carry on the ethos of stewardship. In fact, many of the young architects who worked

with us in the early years have gone on to become part of the next generation of Toronto’s best firms.

In 2020, we expanded the leadership of KPMB with seven new partners as an extension of our legacy practice. The pandemic created the opportunity to pause and review our values with our new partners and senior leadership and to share these publicly. We felt this was critical, especially in a fast-track market where most buildings go from BIM to built. We advocate for the time to pay attention to detail, create mockups to understand the impact of scale and proportion, and insist on providing on-site presence of the design team during construction — all factors in our ability to deliver excellence.

Manifesting Stewardship: Design and Process

DI: Can you share some examples?

MM: Value is embedded in many places in a building: in the logic of strong plans, in creating handsome gathering spaces that engage community, in the importance of choreographing movement within a building and positioning staircases to act as social interlocutors, in using quality materials thoughtfully to assure durability and, above all, in rich and often quirky details that make buildings beloved.



It’s time for architecture to become a movement towards something again.



Projects like the Royal Conservatory (2009) or, most recently, the revitalization of Massey Hall (2021), align perfectly with stewardship. Both projects preserve beloved heritage buildings in our city and include strategic and discrete contemporary additions that animate the public realm and enrich the offering of live music, making it possible to touch more lives.

Cielo at 300 Bloor Street West is an example of a creative development that involves a dramatic reimagining of a heritage property. The project — supported by the Bloor Street United Church community and local developer Collecdev — offers a new model for reimagining beautiful but underutilized churches and reinvigorating a community with new energy. The sanctuary of the heritage church is retained and additional space is added for community outreach programs. New office space is built as part of the redevelopment and, importantly, owned by the church to ensure a revenue stream in perpetuity. A condominium tower is built on the site with parking below-grade.

This is a unique proposal and one that other churches are looking to adopt. So many congregations are looking to their next chapter, and the evolution of their values, as they transition from an emphasis on worship towards social responsibility in the face of social, economic, and environmental issues in their communities.

Stewardship of architectural ideas, from the translation and interpretation of the client's original vision into a narrative or generative sketch, is carried forward by a talented project team through every stage of the architectural process, iterated and reiterated, and then put into the layering of construction that begins with foundations and structure through to final materials. We begin at the interview and (reluctantly) step off when a building is turned over for use.

We also like to stay in touch with our former clients, checking back with them to see how the building is functioning, always looking for ways to learn and improve.

Aligning Values

DI: How are you aligning these values with new generations of staff and clients?

MM: Our people are our greatest resource. Historically, it was the quality of the work that attracted talent to our firm, but increasingly it is our purpose-driven work — projects that focus on social issues and environmental sustainability. As the next generation challenges the profession, the old ways of doing and designing are crumbling by default. The younger generations are saying that architecture is at risk of becoming mechanistic — too much about time, speed, efficiency, money, profit. It's time for architecture to become a movement towards something again. This is where KPMB is and where we can lead.

We are committed to working with clients who share our values, on residential projects that integrate affordable units, to extending accessibility in all its forms — not only to meet code requirements — and to making sustainable projects. True sustainability includes not only environmental factors but also social and economic ones. We respond to clients who articulate 'purpose' and have developed pro-formas that ensure long-term viability.

Our practice is differentiated by the culture it embodies, even as we actively evolve it. We are a culture of individuals with deep capability, experience and commitment to the art of architecture and its potential to advance a better world. It is all about stewardship — of ideas and of people who cherish working at the level to which we hold ourselves individually and collectively accountable.

DI: To be good stewards seems integral with the idea of choice and decision-making — what you say yes to and, perhaps more importantly, what you say no to. For example, you shared a recent RFP you declined because it felt like a cattle call — some 35 well-known firms were invited to propose. To be able to be selective in the work you take on demands success in other areas.

MM: We have always respected and treated every project and client as unique and part of a larger ecosystem of society. Saying no is challenging, but we work in many different sectors, so if one sector experiences a downturn, we look to others to sustain the practice. Adaptation to climate change has created a need to redesign and retrofit older buildings to reduce energy consumption. As Einstein said, you can't solve the problem with the same thinking that created it. Ultimately, when choosing what work to pursue, we always return to our core values and look for projects that provide opportunities for sustainability and equity. We have amazing, forward-thinking clients who are asking us to shift paradigms for their institutions, and we are inspired to help them realize these aspirations.

Purpose and Placekeeping

DI: The idea that we become what we do has always been an interesting notion in architecture, since without clients who need help, we have no work. How purposeful have you been in this?

MM: From day one we committed to cultivating a strong sense of community in all our projects, as well as to the art of architecture. In this context, it resonates at the level of stewardship, and I believe this is who we are today. It is more relevant than ever, with some updates to be more articulate about attitudes to advancing EDI through design and reducing harm to the earth.

We have always believed in a people-centric response to the urban context, with the use of infill to increase density, enriching the fabric of the city through new/old juxtapositions, creating flexible envelopes to open up architecture in our too-short summers (and now to offer fresh air year-round), and creating great rooms within buildings to gather in a sense of community during long winters. These architectural roots represent who we are, even as we evolve to adapt to the forces of change.

Prior to the pandemic, we were addressing the issues of decolonization, EDI and climate justice, but the social and economic inequities that were further exposed during these last two years have accelerated our learning curve towards greater literacy in these spaces. EDI is now being woven into all aspects of our practice and will be manifest in the built work.

In Canada, we are all engaged in the process of learning, working closely with Indigenous architects and consultants as integrated members of our design teams. For example, KPMB, in association with Hindle Architects and Tawaw was recently awarded the commission to design and revitalize Arts Commons in Calgary, the third largest performing arts center in North America and Canada's largest. The client has made breaking down barriers and reaching out to the diversity of all cultures part of its core mandate and the RFP asked us to incorporate "Indigenous ways of knowing." We teamed up with Tawaw Partner Wanda Dalla Costa, Canada's first Indigenous female architect, who inspired us with concepts of "place-keeping," concerned with keeping memories of the local alive and connecting to local understanding, and "place-knowing," a practice in which traditional knowledge informs communities and gives meaning to the cultural landscape. Both of these principles are fully aligned with stewardship. Earth-centric design, valuing and honoring all living things, is fundamental to sustainabili-

ty in its broadest definition, and we are actively incorporating these shared values into the Arts Commons Transformation (ACT Calgary) project, now in concept design.

Caring

DI: Caring for buildings over time is an aspect of stewardship. You mentioned building into your contract the requirement of the client coming back to you for any building modifications over five years after its completion. What compels that idea?

MM: Contractually we limit our service as architects to the completed building, but, in fact, extending beyond the warranty period, with appropriate fees, should be essential to the stewardship of a successful project. Many of our clients do come back to us to continue to work with them as their world changes, to add to the original vision with new program elements and landscape.

At the beginning of our practice, we won the international design competition for Kitchener City Hall and were able to negotiate into the contract that our firm would be guaranteed any modifications to the fabric of the building for a five-year period. (I had heard that Moshe Safdie had done this and was impressed by it.) We were so young, and this was such an important project for us — to represent the ideal of democracy and to extend outreach to people to participate in the most prominent building in the fast-growing Kitchener community. I was concerned that we be allowed to follow the project through its break-in period. Right off the bat, we were asked to change the use of a small, visible element on the ground floor. Who better to do this work than the original architects?

The other part of this question relates to the stewardship of iconic or signature works of architecture by late master architects, particularly of beloved, cherished buildings. In past decades, KPMB has been selected to not only add to but also to upgrade and improve the performance of many modernist-era buildings while respecting their original vision. Paul Hawken in his new book “Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation” calls for a “massive worldwide building upgrade” to net-zero emissions. This would be wonderful, and to do so with beautiful results would be even better, particularly for architecturally distinctive buildings exemplary of a specific period in history.

Robertson Hall (1965) at Princeton University, led by my partners, is an example of a full update of the work of a signature architect. In that instance, our team got completely into the Minoru Yamasaki mindset. We did not build over it or “mark” it with a new style or expression but aligned the essence of KPMB’s style to respect, respond to and prioritize quality compatibly with the original building.

Our assignment at Orchestra Hall in downtown Minneapolis was to add patron amenities to the signature hall by architects Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer (1974). The expansion of the lobbies included a transformation from opacity to transparency, with expanded use and animation of the precinct. Driven by the expanded facilities, revenue increased by 75%. The new pavilion, or City Room, is an extension of the new lobbies that and it creates an ensemble within the public realm, blurring the demarcation of the Hall and the newly restored Peavey Plaza.

Narrative

DI: How do you leverage the idea of narrative — the passage of time and the telling of stories in your buildings?

MM: We always begin with a narrative, imagining how the vision of a client can be realized in the building form. We start with stories about strengthening institutions, reimagining how a building can become more transparent and magnetic within its context, and how it might reach out to the community through gestures that welcome diverse communities.

We tell stories of past projects to show how architecture is in the service of a broader vision. We were awarded a commission to create a master plan and double the size of the Brearley School in New York, retaining its heritage building on Manhattan’s East River and designing a new building up the block. This coincided with a moment of global awakening with Malala Yousafzai being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and Malala and Emma Watson speaking to the United Nations advocating for women and girls. Brearley’s vision and purpose were clearly stated: “to challenge girls of adventurous intellect and diverse backgrounds to think critically and creatively and prepare them for principled engagement in the world.” My dream assignment. Now complete, the new building has been praised by the school for exceeding the expectations of every challenge: accommodating an expanded program, fitting into a constrained urban site and creating a campus that allows girls to attend K-12 with updated facilities that support the school’s academic, social and sports programs.

Our narratives describe breaking down the barriers to inclusivity no matter what the program. We do this with architecture that is welcoming, through its spatial quality and inclusive programming. Our clients, the leaders of publicly accessible cultural and academic institutions, ask us to do this. Stewardship of ideas is critical. Our clients tell us that we deliver what we promise in our original interview — an all too rare outcome.

Economics

DI: How can we redirect the economics of design fees and profitability to allow focus on stewardship?

MM: We need to advocate for respectful fees. The demands of the project process have grown exponentially. Practice is stretched thin to provide the service levels that support design excellence. Add to this the continuous upgrades to software and systems and the time to think through the complex challenges of delivering high-quality architecture with adaptable, durable, inspired spaces, to last “for all time” and you have many dimensions.

As architects we must speak to the accumulated value of the design, beyond the fee, of experience and wisdom over time. Architecture has the longest timeline of all art forms. There is a famous anecdotal story about a woman meeting Picasso in a café. She asks him for a drawing, and he creates one right there on a napkin. When she asks him how much, he tells her 40,000 francs. She protests, “But it only took you 30 seconds to draw that!” He says, “Madam, it took me a lifetime.”

DI: Being better stewards of our buildings is a higher objective, but it has multiple objects or motives. For example, doing it for self-interest (to ensure no one comes after and messes up “our” design); doing it to ensure follow-on services and fees over time to lock in continuing revenue (“our ongoing revenues”); or doing it for our client’s best interest (updating their facility as people, work and the world change over time); for society at large; and other reasons.



MM: We are emerging from the pandemic into a world with a new reality: Some will resist it, some will embrace it. In the last two years, we faced a reckoning with systemic racism in the form of the George Floyd tragedy in 2020 and the discovery a year later of the unmarked graves of children in Residential Schools across Canada. The restrictions and social isolation exposed the disparity between the poor and wealthy, and the other pandemic, the challenges in mental health.

KPMB's motivation expanded to use architecture to advance social and environmental causes. This touches on all dimensions of the practice. We realized we are responsible for the well-being of the 120+ people who work at KPMB, but also for all the people they are responsible for — as well as the specialists who collaborate with us on contracts. That's more than 500 people. A priority was to sustain the economy of the studio and keep everyone employed. We reached out to every person, from student to leadership, and made sure they were supported emotionally and technically. Videoconferencing tools allowed us to “see” ourselves and our community as an ecosystem. We are all connected and can nourish each other through empowerment, kindness, compassion and appreciation.

Serving our clients' best interests and aligning design with the forces of change has always been our main motivation, along with providing a supportive culture of work for all the people on our team at KPMB. I go back to the Brearley School in New York as an example, it has it all: empowering women, responding to climate change and urban restoration. We were highly motivated when we were invited to compete for the project back in 2014, at a time when the voices of young women were rising, and because this project was really about the stewardship of young women to become future leaders. As the project evolved,

we were also able to influence the sustainable design agenda and help them think about planning for a net-zero campus in the future.

As it happened, the design was also eerily prescient, as Brearley was one of the few schools in its network of peer schools that remained open and functional during the pandemic, with 800 people attending daily and staying healthy. The well-proportioned classrooms, fresh air, efficient filtration systems, operable windows, wide hallways and interconnecting stairs facilitated COVID-19 protocols.

Our core objective and motivation are the sheer love of architecture and being part of something better and bigger than ourselves. Since every client is different, we have the opportunity to constantly rethink everything and find ways to put architecture into the service of making a better and more beautiful, sustainable world. Every new opportunity is exciting.

Legacy

DI: Look into the future to imagine the benefits of stewardship to your firm in 10 years. What key forces contributed to your success?

MM: In 10 years, I am optimistic we will look back at this incredible and fast-paced time of early 21st century culture and be grateful for the changes we made. KPMB will be recognized as allies of building a new kind of society through the vehicle of architecture. The KPMB brand, as a legacy practice, will be recognized and sought after for design excellence, innovation and our commitment to act as stewards of the future. I am optimistic because we are planting the seeds for change now and many things are already taking root:

- For the past few years, we have been collaborating with more Indigenous architects and consultants to indigenize our institutions. This group currently includes Wanda Dalla Costa, TAWAW (ACT); Georgina Riel, Riel Cultural Consulting (Agnes Etherington Art Gallery); Lorraine Whitman, Elder and President of the Native Women's Association of Canada, and Mi'kmaq Artist Jordan Bennett (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia); and Brian Porter and Matthew Hickey from Two Row Architect on a series of projects. We are also mentored by distinguished Elders that include John Beau-cage, Gerald McMaster, and others. It's happening, and fast. Wanda Dalla Costa recently told me, "There is no culture in the world that has undergone more change in such a short time than in the Indigenous people of North America."
- The isolation, fear and uncertainty of the pandemic years have taken a toll on mental health. This year, we are advancing projects such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Research Centre. Ten years from now, the center will be revolutionizing the understanding of the brain and implementing new treatments for mental illness.
- The Revitalization of Massey Hall in Toronto and the Jenny Belzberg Theatre at Banff Centre for Arts & Creativity, which both opened in 2021, are precisely designed for the future. In 10 years, I am sure they will be the sites of creative innovation that bring inspiration to diverse audiences and communities, as well as supporting new artistic expression.
- The work we are doing right now to advance equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), particularly in race literacy and understanding the crucial role our profession plays in anti-racism, will have an impact on moving the needle toward inclusivity. In 2032, there will be a healthy balance of women and people of color leading practices and projects.

DI: Recently, RFPs have put a five-year limit on project experience. How does this support an ethos of stewardship if deep experience and the performance of buildings older than five years are considered irrelevant?

MM: The five-year window is deeply concerning because it perpetuates short-term thinking and prioritizes efficiency over innovation and creativity. On average, it takes five years for a building, or a major interiors project, to be born into the world, from design to completion of construction, and one to two years to "tune" the building to perform as envisioned.

Our ACT Calgary project was the first and only recent RFP that asked for an example of a 20-year project. Luckily, we had the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, which opened in 2000. It was amazing to share that the theater was thriving (until the pandemic), and the spaces that were designed to prioritize flexibility were supporting entirely new and previously unimagined programs to advance equity among Chicago's diverse communities.



Architecture is more than a professional pursuit or a business. Architecture is a gift to the future.

We are fortunate to have been selected for the ACT project — for a client who, along with their partners, including the city of Calgary, are committed to putting architecture, urban conservation and planning into the service of ensuring a vibrant future for the city.

The Long View

DI: Any final perspectives?

MM: Almost 60 years ago, Eric Arthur wrote “Toronto, No Mean City.” It was a call to honor architectural history to shape a better future. I am proud of the work KPMB has contributed to the art of architecture in our city, and now, in many cities across Canada and in the USA. Yet, when it comes to architecture and urban planning in our time, I would like to see the concept of stewardship highlighted as a methodology to achieve EDI and solve climate change. We need to think beyond a 25-year lifespan for buildings, which is the current mindset, and start designing for 100+ years.

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine and co-founder of the DFC, summed up his philosophy of life in one question: “Are we being good ancestors?” Roman Kraznic cites him on the cover of his book, “The Good Ancestor” and proceeds to share six practical ways to retrain our brains to think of the long view.

The wisdom of Indigenous people who consider everything in deep time — seven generations past and seven generations future—is the medicine to treat the short-term gains and unlimited-growth virus threatening our planet and the future. We need to inject this thinking into how we think about the stewardship of architecture.

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Architecture is a gift to the future.

Marianne McKenna is a founding partner at KPMB Architects and the recent winner of the Design Futures Council’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Born in Montreal and educated at Swarthmore College and Yale University, she is an officer of the Order of Canada for designing “architecture that enriches the public experience.” She sits on the International Advisory Board for the McEwen School of Architecture at Laurentian University.