

Inflection Points

DesignIntelligence[®]
Quarterly



KELLY FARRELL

Corporate and Commercial
Practice Director, NBBJ

DesignIntelligence - Michael LeFevre (DI): You've just made quite a change. After 17 years Callison-RTKL, including most recently as President and CEO, you took a new leadership position with NBBJ. That's dramatic after 17 years – a significant career turning point. How did it come about? Can you share your thinking?

Kelly Farrell (KF): Yes, of course. It's a question I've been asked a lot recently, and for a good reason. After 17 years at CRTKL, it was not an easy decision. I'm proud of the people of CRTKL and what we built. It's been a wonderful journey, and I've made some great friends along the way.

Inflection Points

NBBJ's Kelly Farrell discusses bold moves, timing, inclusion, leadership, and priorities — during challenging times

At the same time, I was ready for a change. That was in part spurred on by a conversation I had with Steve McConnell, NBBJ's Managing Partner, and Tim Johnson, an NBBJ Partner who focuses on commercial development. We discussed the role of design to influence people's lives and radically improve outcomes for clients and communities.

Part of what makes NBBJ unique is its focus on integrating science, research, and data intelligence to design. In our conversation, the prospect of leveraging that influence and scaling to do good for people, communities, and clients was exciting.

Everyone I work with at NBBJ has a passion for great design and driving a more significant bottom-line impact around the planet, people and business. It's a spectacular platform. The design work is excellent, and when you add the science and research platforms, you get tremendous innovation potential.

Given the opportunity, it was an irresistible combination.

DI: It sounds like the stars were aligned. It's good to hear you talking about science, research, business, and scaling – things most architects haven't been good at for 100 years. Are NBBJ Fellows employees of the firm or strategic alliances?

KF: NBBJ's Applied Research platform encompasses many people, organizations, and geographies. We have an ongoing research partnership with the University of Washington focused on acoustics, healthy work, and other topics relevant to our clients. We are also in our fifth year of the NBBJ Fellowship Program with Dr. John Medina, a molecular biologist who advises us on the intersection of neuroscience research, the built environment and design.

DI: Why was this the right opportunity?

KF: The firm has excellent agility and self-determination. In one of my first lunches with Steve McConnell, he asked, "Do you know why we do what we do?" I said, "I hope it's to make the world a better place." He said, "Yes, one project at a time. That's why we do it." I embrace that philosophy wholeheartedly.



I also have a long career ahead of me, and the opportunity to join a platform that the firm has built is impressive. It's an opportunity to bring clients that platform with its multi-industry knowledge and geographic reach.

DI: What attracted them to you? What's the synergy?

KF: We immediately aligned about what design can achieve, specifically that you don't have to put design excellence on hold to integrate data and intelligence. My position has been that you can improve human performance if you back it with science and research and are willing to invest in technology to prove it. That alignment was part of the attraction. Also, NBBJ has such a broad reach user-based campuses, corporate headquarters, healthcare, and commercial work, and I

bring mixed-use commercial experience. With the diverse practice background, I think they saw that as a strength to join the team and grow.

DI: Your move is happening at a unique time in history, during a pandemic. Can you talk about the timing?

KF: Nobody had COVID on their radar. It's been the most interesting time in my life – the impact of a global pandemic. Many of our clients don't have the luxury of working from home. We've got people out on the frontlines, families who have made sacrifices. Many people have suffered irreplaceable losses, and still, there's a silver lining. If any good comes out of COVID, it's that the whole world is reimagining, rethinking, and reminding themselves that new things are possible.

“

...there's a silver lining... the whole world is reimagining, rethinking, and reminding themselves that new things are possible. It's not a time to be meek; it's a time to be bold.

It's not a time to be meek; it's a time to be bold. Regarding my career change, I could have said, "Come talk to me in a year," but again, it's a time to be bold.

I see the market is reprioritizing wellbeing, health, personal mobility, and the connectivity that technology affords. Would we have done this interview via Zoom a year ago? Probably not, we would have met up – sat down face to face.

We're also reaching an inflection point with COVID, where vaccines are coming out. In April of 2020, we wondered if or when that would happen. Over the summer, I found myself thinking, "Now is the time to be bold. Now is the time to take a risk, accept a challenge that propels you up that next mountain - take the jump over the canyon and go after it. " We all agreed now is the time, let's do it, and hit the ground running in 2021, so here I am.

DI: The secret is to be prepared, be present, and be looking when the opportunity presents itself.

KF: Yes, be open to the discussion, and engage in it. The profession is redefining itself. Businesses are disrupted by technology and changing market conditions. Some of our clients traditionally stayed in one swim lane. Now they've stretched to three or four lanes. If we're well prepared and keep pushing what is possible, we'll be their partners for that journey. It may seem like an odd time to make a significant change, but it didn't seem strange to me at all. The timing felt right.



I had gotten a lot mentoring from people who were new to the business, kids right out of school, because the profession's roots and apprenticeship: "Follow me, do what I do" is an old model.

Now it's about continuing the momentum.

DI: You had been in LA. Where is home now?

KF: For the last seven years, I was on a plane most of the year. LA was home base, but I was only there a few days each month. Now, I'm a bit more grounded. I spent about half my time in New York before moving to LA, so it's good to be back. New York is such a resilient city; it never lets itself down; it always comes together and finds a better way forward. The energy of the city and business community is impressive. I was in the city last week, and it's quiet. Sleepy. I sat outside for a very socially distanced drink with a colleague and realized I've never seen so few people in the city before. It's surreal. But it's not going to stay that way. The city is going to pick itself up. It's going to say, "how do we do this smarter, better, stronger?"

DI: Let's talk about leadership — and you. You spent a significant part of your career working in the trenches, doing projects.

KF: A good friend gave me the advice when I received my first significant promotion: “Whatever you do, don't ever completely walk away from the work – it's the magic. It's why got the in business to do in the first place.” I've taken that to heart. As a rule, I never completely let go of the work, despite my various leadership roles. Because if you let go, you lose a critical connection that allows you to add immense value to your clients and the communities.

That connectivity allows me to benefit from excellent mentoring. Good mentoring comes in all shapes, from people with a large cadre of experience to people outside or just entering the profession.

Reverse mentoring by those entering or new to the profession is also important. We architects have strong roots in apprenticeship “follow me, do what I do,” and this era of “objective-based outcomes” gives those voices a place to change how we work and what we can accomplish.

You have to ask the least experienced person on the team, “What would you do differently, and how would you do it better?” They benefit from not having preconceived notions and think beyond conventional wisdom. It's key to our business. We offer knowledge, talents, and capabilities; gaining perspective allows you to make those elements stronger.

“

*...moments like that can reaffirm our direction.
Empathy has developed in the world that
we shouldn't let go of.*

DI: Having the courage to engage entry-level team members to unleash the power of their beginner's minds is counterintuitive, but it's great coaching and 360-degree mentoring. To be inclusive to entry-level folks with a well-timed question can make all the difference in a project's direction – and in their careers.

KF: There's lots of genius around the table to tap. The generation entering the profession now is bold, and they want more from it than it has traditionally delivered. We have a responsibility to give that genius a place to grow. My dad was in capital improvements and large projects for Methodist Hospital in Omaha, NE, making me a proud Midwesterner.

On weekends I visited construction projects with him and saw how things were built. A lot of people were

involved. My dad was a client. He'd come home and regale us with stories about how he had to solve problems. He'd lament why he couldn't get the team to solve things together. That was his role as a client – making sure the team worked. I thought that was fascinating. He hired everyone, and he still had to get them to work together. He would tell us to be a good coach, no matter your position, and make sure people work together. So, yes, coaching started young at my house.

DI: What other dimensions are you exploring... people, processes, tools, disciplines, diversity, inclusion?

KF: All the above. What an overdue conversation. At our best, we as designers get to do complex work that influences a lot of people.

But to think we can do it alone is arrogant. We've got to partner with people and create more diversity in process and decision making, whether it's race, skills, capability, or service, to have a better kaleidoscope through which to solve problems.

I had a humbling moment a decade ago. I was overseas in China, in a neighborhood set for repositioning, and I had a clipboard in my hand, taking notes. I'm keenly aware that I am an American walking through an area in China that's about to be torn down and rebuilt. The question was, what do I think should happen there? It wasn't a great question. The better question was, what does the community think makes them better? How do they engage? How do they prosper? We needed a person from the community on our team.

We need more diversity in the talent pool as well. Many students are going through school right now have the opportunity to do rotations. Architecture is their primary pursuit, but they're spending time in medical schools, business schools, and other disciplines, so they know more about their clients' education when they graduate. It's fantastic. We need more thinkers like that in our business – more perspective. I've been privileged to work with nurses who work in design and bring entire facilities to life, from equipment planning to facility transitioning. Their success makes sense; the healthcare teams speak the same language and know what they need to accomplish for their patients; having those unique talents on the design side allows everyone to work better together.

We need more partnering like that across the board. To become the firm of the future, we need to seek those pieces rather than waiting for somebody to ask, "Should we go hire somebody?" Let's question, "Who do we need to be successful? What unique talents allow us to gain better perspective?"

We're good at creating space, but we need partners who are good at recognizing why we need to make that space and what it needs to accomplish to solve the better problem.

DI: I'm struck by how well-formed your thoughts are on these issues. You also strike me as an anomaly in our profession — you're a leader. We don't learn much about leadership in school. Most of us don't aspire to it. You have. When did you aspire to be a leader?

KF: My parents believed in transparency and debate. My mother used to set topics up at the dinner table, "This 'insert your favorite topic' was on the news. Let's talk about it." She'd say, "Kelly, you take this position. John—" that's my brother, "you take this position." And we'd talk about things.

She had this great saying, and I'm trying to instill it into my son. She said, "Life is a series of choices. You make them. And indecision is not a choice." That was her thing. She believed you choose and can even change your mind, but you don't get to sit idly. That has stuck with me.

Looking back, I can also say I had many coaches, few formal but much more in informal relationships. Sometimes you can walk into a room and think you understand the whole problem. But then you take a break and come back in, and you realize it's very different than you thought. Good coaches, whether they're colleagues, leaders, or friends, help you gain perspective.

I was raised to work hard and have some grit because life is not easy. If you put the work in and have determination, it won't matter what role you take on. You'll figure out how to lead.

I've got to imagine most of the world's industries are moving from management to leadership. They are wildly different things. The person two days out of school needs to be a leader too. Leadership has to work across the whole spectrum.

DI: In different ways than we saw in the top-down command and control world because we're in a different context?

KF: At its best, leadership is infectious. You build a team around transparency, respect, consensus, and alignment.

How does leadership get us all to row in the right direction and play well together? It's a team sport no one person can do it all – if they can, they probably aren't doing it well.



*A lot of us want to go back.
We want the connectivity and community.*

*Now, we have to swing that pendulum into
something reasonable, because if it jerks back,
the infrastructure isn't there yet
to accommodate it*

Looking at sports for an analogy, every person understands the roles and how those relationships work together to achieve something more significant. They know when to follow the plan and when to switch positions. They find team flow. Good leadership and teamwork create a stronger entity a better player, and it fundamentally builds on trust.

We're solving more complex issues in design than ever before. We're past shelter and rapidly evolving experience. We're solving more significant problems. The only way we're going to do it is with more leadership. And leaders must be inherently comfortable with admitting when they don't know how to do something.

If you're not the best person to tell us how to do this, you may know someone else in your network. NBBJ's organization is a network. It shows where to get resources and smart people. Businesses structured this way set an excellent stage for leadership.

DI: What are you worried about? What are you hopeful about?

KF: They are probably the same things. I am worried that we, as a society, must figure out where we're going. We've faced some of our biggest challenges over the last 10 months.

That we've survived gives me hope we can solve those challenges and work together to help communities, change outcomes, and do better.

I worry that we are creatures of habit. That 10-month timeframe could be just a blip in the wide arc of history. Or it could be a catalyst for tremendous change. Our profession is trying to redefine itself. There's more technology disruption than ever. The way people use spaces, the way spaces are transacted. Do you buy a home now, or do you rent forever? Twenty years ago, you bought a home. That's what you did. You rented for a few years, saved up, and then bought something. Now, that's not automatic.

The profession has this fantastic opportunity to be relevant and shape where we're going. But we need to embrace science and technology to do it.

I want to play with high-performing teams. I want to play in new fields and keep redefining the game so we can keep moving. That's the beauty of what we do — if we're good at it, we get to keep doing it. And we do it better in teams. I spend many nights waiting for the pandemic to be over. Then I spend mornings thinking, "as we start to come out of this, what are the 10 things we're all going to do better? And how do we start putting that into motion?" That's where my head is.

DI: Given too much to do, where do you attack first? One secret is what do you say no to. What has to stop to allow room for the new stuff. Something's got to go.

KF: Yes, something's got to go. If you can get your priorities straight, the things that need to leave are easy to see. We are all so connected all the time that there is



You have to let go of the things that are not priorities and direct them to people who see them as one. Align what you do with what you prioritize accomplishing most.

this tyranny of the urgent, and the urgent is rarely a priority. You have to let go of the things that are not priorities and direct them to people who see them as one. Align what you do with what you prioritize accomplishing most.

I schedule and organize my day in a way where I can perform best. I make my best decisions in the morning.

Don't ask me to decide anything of importance after 5:00. I'll sleep on it and decide in the morning. We all know our cycles and rhythms. You have to organize your interactions to support you when you're at your best. The priorities, for me, are...

[Knock on door.] **KF:** Oh, I hear footsteps. We're going to get interrupted. Here he comes. Hi there...

DI: Okay. *[4-Year-old son enters. New York is being blanketed with 12" of snow. Son needs Mom's assistance removing coat and boots. Interview pauses.]*

KF: One sec. How is the snow? Son: Great. KF: It was great? Son: Yeah. KF: Okay. Hold on. Sorry, Michael, one second.

DI: You're fine. Take your time.

KF: There's a lot of snow, huh? Son: Yeah. [Mom unzips son's coat.] KF: Alright, out you go. Want those boots off? Alright, one sec. Hold on, hold on. There you go. Okay, out you go. [Boots off. Son leaves.] Thank you. Sorry. I'm back. Best part of life. [Interview resumes.]

DI: One of the positive outcomes from COVID is that what just happened is now acceptable behavior. It just struck me — that your moment with your son just now — is an important part of this conversation. Because it used to be that an interruption like that was embarrassing or unprofessional. Now, it's delightful. And we get to share it with you thanks to Zoom video calls. Maybe our pause due to COVID has helped us remember that moments like that are the most important things. They can reaffirm our direction.

KF: Yes, they can. It's real life. For a long time, society required people to leave home at home and only do work at work. I don't know if that's possible anymore.

Because whatever's going on in your life influences the rest. We've gotten to this point where we're in each other's bedrooms, basements, and kitchens. I know more about people now than I have for 30 years because of Zoom.

Empathy has developed in the world that we shouldn't let go of — to your point, it's better. I know more people's pets' names, kids' names, and the squirrel that might be hanging out on their back deck than ever before. Being together in new digital ways helps us see each other and the world a little better. Now we see people not just in role X, and role X only looks like so. We're seeing people over a broader spectrum. That allows people to bring their knowledge base to the table faster because they don't have to spend an hour explaining who they are when it matters.

DI: If we're talking about priorities, that's a pretty good place to start — with yourself and your family first, and then work, in that order.

KF: My priority is to amplify personal and family relationships as a foundation for strong work. The vaccine is going to give us a starting point to begin to feel safe about going out. The vaccine is offering us that inflection point.

It's not an easy road we're on. The economy has a long recovery ahead. Entire business segments are on hold until we know how the future will unfold. People are renting space who haven't had any business in 10 months.

Some companies with space have realized they don't need all of it. Most of my clients and colleagues aren't going to be back full time right away.

It's been a pendulum swing. The majority of employees for office-based corporations worked in an office before COVID. Now, the majority are working at home during COVID. But a pendulum doesn't stay on the extremes long. A lot of us want to go back. We want connectivity and community. Now, we have to swing that pendulum into something reasonable because if it jerks back, the infrastructure isn't there yet to accommodate it.

DI: Kelly, thank you for being introspective with us.

KF: Thank you.

DI: I wish you luck in your new role. I wish you good things. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you'd like to say?

KF: It's a brilliant time to step out there and do things. I hope the entire industry steps up because the world needs us now more than it has in a long time.

DI: I hope we do too.

Kelly Farrell is a Corporate and Commercial Practice Director with NBBJ in New York, a global design firm focusing on commercial market sectors. As a Corporate and Commercial Practice Director in NBBJ's New York office, Kelly focuses on projects that create healthy environments and better human performance through research-backed design.

A natural leader with a strong business sense, Kelly is known for her ability to lead complex mixed-use projects from concept to reality. Throughout the course of her 20 plus year career Kelly has developed a reputation for design solutions that are forward-thinking, sustainable and pragmatic. She has portfolio of award-winning projects that better inhabitants lives and are woven into their surrounding community.

Kelly is also an established thought leader, sought after by industry organizations and publications to provide insights on current and future residential trends.

Kelly most recently served as President and CEO of CallisonRTKL, where she helmed the firmwide leadership team. While at CallisonRTKL, she played an integral role in major projects which contributed to the redevelopment of downtown Los Angeles, including the Four Seasons Residences Los Angeles, 888 at Grand Hope Park and L.A. Live.