

A photograph of a winding road through a forest at dawn or dusk. The scene is bathed in a soft, golden light, creating a misty atmosphere. The road curves through the trees, leading the eye from the bottom center towards the upper right. The trees are dark silhouettes against the lighter sky.

Looking Back, Going Forward

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly



JAMES MINER

CEO, Sasaki

Looking Back, Going Forward

Sasaki CEO James Miner reflects on a 70-year firm evolution, a 10-year transformation, understanding history, expanding disciplines, the quest for diversity, and next-generation leadership.

DesignIntelligence - Michael LeFevre (DI): Your firm recently underwent a transformation. New positions, new vision, and other changes. Have those adaptations helped you cope with COVID and the other issues that have come to the fore this year – political, social, economic, and environmental?

James Miner (JM): It's been a decade-long process. The outward expression of that transformation has only been noticeable over the past year or so after we highlighted our updated mission statement and design culture on our new website. But there's been a tremendous amount of internal work, reflection, and coordination to get to where

we are today. The driving force behind all this change has been a strong desire for increased collaboration and support for one another, especially among firm leaders.

Firm leaders at Sasaki today want to work together, share ideas, and even share credit for the work. The past model forced firm leaders into competition with one another under the “eat what you kill,” “seller/doer” principal model. That model is a challenge for anyone that excels at one aspect of building the business but not the others. As a result, the firm leadership was more homogenous than it is today. We have been actively working to identify other skills firm leadership can provide and value.

For example, are principal leaders working to advance the diversity of the firm, engaging with others to achieve the highest quality design, or actively sponsor the next wave of firm leadership? When you only measure performance by revenue and profit, these skills are not incentivized.

I wish I could tell you we've figured it all out, but this is still a work in progress even after working at it for several years. That we've been having these conversations is a critical first step. It also laid the groundwork for not only surviving the past nine months but continuing to take on major initiatives that respond to all the political, social, economic, and environmental issues that have grown in importance throughout the pandemic. As a partnership, we've been building trust so we can take on tough issues together.

Doing this in person is hard enough and doing it over Zoom while working from home has been even harder. But because we have emphasized collaboration and a sense of openness among our leadership, we've been able to move ahead despite these challenges. Since COVID struck last spring, we've taken on initiatives around systemic racism, gender diversity, and inclusion. We've opened a new office in Denver to be able to serve our clients at a time when travel has been restricted.

“And, we're in the early stages of moving our main office into downtown Boston, which we see as an opportunity to totally transform our work environment to reflect new ways of working we expect will remain with us even after the pandemic is behind us.”



...rather than taking all those profits home in your pockets, you can invest those earnings in less profitable, but more rewarding and meaningful work.

DI: Have any aspects not worked out as planned?

JM: One of our biggest challenges has been around diversity, especially at the leadership level. In terms of gender, Sasaki has more women than men. The problem is distribution — considerably more women than men among our employees with 10 years of experience or less, but far more men than women among senior employees. This creates a gap in role models for women seeking to advance their careers at the firm, and a sponsorship gap for emerging female leaders. This has led to retention challenges and a continued imbalance between men and women at the top levels of firm leadership, even though we have promoted more women to the role of principal than in the past.

One key lesson learned is that sponsorship is critical to success.

DIVERSITY

Men will often reflect back on their ascent to leadership and pride themselves on surviving several “sink or swim” moments when they were thrown in front of clients, given an opportunity to make an important presentation, or handed a key client relationship and told not to screw it up. What we men fail to realize is that someone else — most likely another man — had enough trust and faith in us to throw us into the water in the first place. Too often, that same trust is not given to our female counterparts. As a result, they don’t get the same chances to shine. Without deliberate sponsorship across gender boundaries, the development of a more diverse leadership group can’t succeed. And gender is only one aspect of diversity — racial diversity requires even more attention and

thought, because our industry lacks diversity and the skills, experience, and sensibilities to deal with those issues.

DI: Having had time to reflect during this past year, what adjustments are you contemplating?

JM: We are in the middle of two major diversity initiatives at Sasaki, one focused on gender and inclusion, the other on what it means to actively be an anti-racist organization. The latter is long overdue, and the events of the past year have taught us we need to be doing more to support racial diversity and equity not only in our organization, but in the work we do.

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A lot of people want to change everything, but don't have the patience to understand why things are the way they are. ...it's important to understand history and why things happened, even if you disagree. You have to ask, "Why did that happen? Why was it done that way?" ... That's something the next generation has to work on.

It's going to take a lot of work to do this right – there is no “quick fix.” We cannot shrug our shoulders at the data. There are simply not enough people of color coming out of design schools. We have to figure out how to introduce more people of color to the design profession earlier, so the talent pipeline grows more diverse over time. We cannot blame our networks for lacking diversity; we have to expand them to be more diverse. We cannot point to our clients' lack of diversity as the reason we do not take on more socially responsible work; we have to be more selective about who we work with and the projects we take on. As hard as all this sounds, it won't be long before those who don't take on these issues in a meaningful way will starve for relevancy.

DI: Sasaki is considered a top landscape design and planning firm. Have you considered expanding your range to explore more “dimensions?” Design disciplines, skillsets, expertise, partnerships, alliances, and diversity of all kinds?

JM: This question touches on part of our firm's identity we have been working hard to change. Sasaki's position in the marketplace is largely shaped by our prominent reputation around landscape architecture, planning, and urban design. What's interesting is that architecture has been a part of the firm since it was founded in 1953, but it's not known well enough. Part of Hideo Sasaki's legacy in the design industry is his belief that landscape architecture, planning, and architecture should be considered as equals – that design should be integrated and informed by the land and the environment.

In his mind, the best buildings were designed to be part of the landscape, not the other way around. In the early days Hideo collaborated closely with Pietro Belluschi, then dean of the architecture school at MIT, while Hideo ran the landscape program at Harvard. Within the first ten years of creating his own firm, Hideo hired Ken DeMay, who was the assistant dean at the Pratt Institute School of Architecture in New York City, to build an architecture practice within the firm. This was all in support of Hideo's multidisciplinary approach to projects that involved planners, urban designers, architects, landscape architects, and civil engineers. Sasaki has continued to include all these design disciplines ever since.

As the firm evolved, our architecture practice became siloed into two distinct practice areas: higher education and corporate interiors. Ten years ago, we made a commitment to embrace our roots and make sure all our design disciplines are represented in each market we serve. That meant we needed to expand our architecture practice to be able to take on mixed-use urban typologies where a lot of our planning and landscape efforts had been focused, in addition to continuing to build our already-robust higher education practice. We're also actively working on building our capacity to do science and technology projects, which has been and will continue to be an important market segment.



DI: In a world where cities, public spaces and workplaces are crying out to be transformed in response to new demands, does your business model need to transform? Are you looking to new forms of engagement, compensation, value, and incentives to support bigger problems – in response to the forces of change affecting professional services models of the past?

JM: That sounds like a loaded question – everyone should always be examining and modifying their business model! In a recent conversation with one of my mentors, he used the analogy of drilling for oil to explain the importance of constantly evolving one's business. As he put it, those who are simply in the business of extraction will eventually run out of oil and will have to shut down their drills and go find something else to do. What this means is if we just focus on one thing – one market, one area of practice, or one way of working – we will eventually go out of business. Firms that focus on extraction don't survive for a hundred years. Firms that keep moving, adapting, and evolving do.

So, the short answer is yes. The longer answer includes efforts to recalibrate employee engagement, professional development, mentoring, and sponsorship. It includes re-examining executive compensation and incentives to make sure the right value sets and behaviors are being rewarded. It has also included increasing the amplitude, scope, and influence of our non-profit arm, the Hideo Sasaki Foundation, to more meaningfully engage with the communities we serve.

DI: Design professionals continue to impact only a small percentage of the built environment. What are the obstacles to being more successful, more valued, and leveraging what we do to have more impact over a broader spectrum?

JM: Part of the reason design professionals only impact a small portion of the built environment is that design is a privileged endeavor. Often, only the most elaborate projects can afford a full team of design experts. Even when a project budget can afford a nationally or globally renowned design firm, it still takes an enlightened client to want to bring in additional consultants to focus on other critical elements such as environmental resilience or community engagement. Publicly funded projects that focus on these topics, on the other hand, tend to be woefully underfunded. One way to counter this is to accept that some areas of practice are more profitable than others. But rather than taking all those profits home in your pockets, you can invest those earnings in less profitable, but more rewarding and meaningful work. For anyone worried about the economics of this, consider the cost of declining retention rates. It is increasingly true that your best and brightest talent will likely go elsewhere if they feel their work is not meaningful.

Another obvious challenge is being in the service industry. Traditionally, a big part of any firm's revenue comes from responding to RFPs, which limits our influence on the direction of our work from the onset. The key here is to invest in pro bono work, research, and PR that reflects our firm's values.

That can lure prospective clients with similar value sets into a way of working together that is less project-specific, and more about a relationship. Longstanding client relationships are more like partnerships, and that is where real change can occur.

DI: What environmental issues do we need to tackle first? Should design professionals become political activists? Most of us are not inclined to do that — we like to do design work. Any thoughts?

JM: Like it or not, politics are no longer taboo in the workplace. We all have to get more comfortable stating our positions and making space for others to state theirs. It's less about political activism and more about participation. Ask your teams the tough questions being debated on the political stage and make it safe for people to express their honest opinions.

The climate crisis has to be at the top of everyone's mind, so engaging in open dialogs about how your work is or should be influenced by climate concerns is a great first step. Where does your firm stand on climate change, and how does it inform the work you do? Would you be willing to design an airport? Would you be willing to stop using concrete in all your buildings? Have you had a conversation in the office about the Green New Deal? How about climate equity?

These conversations can be important learning opportunities for everyone, so you don't have to be an activist to engage. No matter where you or your firm stands on any

of this, you'll have great ammunition on hand for conversations with your clients when these issues come up. And they will come up.

These kinds of discussions will do more than provide fodder for client discussions. Because the environment is such a broad topic, it can be hard to know where to start, and overwhelming to try to solve everything. But every design firm can do something, whether it is sourcing more local materials, finding ways to integrate renewable energy sources, or developing creative adaptive reuse strategies for existing buildings.

DI: What are you proud of?

JM: Looking back, I'm proud of the firm leadership transformation. The people who built the firm and preceded me had a very different set of priorities. Not that they were wrong. Times change, people change, leadership styles change, and some leadership styles are appropriate for different periods of time. You can't take somebody who ran a firm one way 20 years ago and put the same leadership style in place today. That doesn't work. I was in the awkward middle, in the Gen X bridge between the Gen Ys and the Boomers. It's been an interesting orchestration.

It was awkward because I was trying to learn from our former CEO, pay respect to the leadership that preceded me, while also trying to listen to a very different side of the firm that was emerging and get through a transition period. It took until 2018 before we finally clicked. It's been a long time. That was the real transition.

Now the firm is evolving because there's a way of working in a dialogue among the leadership that gets us through challenging issues together — as opposed to second-guessing and back-channeling. “Interestingly, the challenges brought on by the pandemic and other social and political crises in 2020 ended up bringing the firm's leadership closer together - I think we all realized these issues were bigger than any one of us could take on alone. We needed each other to get through it all.”

DI: What were the secrets to your weathering that storm?

JM: It's not that any of those who preceded me did something wrong. A lot of people want to change everything but don't have the patience to understand why things are the way they are. It's not that change is bad. I love change. I love pushing and doing things, but it's important to understand history and why things happened, even if you disagree. You have to ask, “Why did that happen? Why was it done that way?” And understand it still has value. That's something the next generation has to work on.

Change agents say, “We should do this, or we should do that.” And I say, “Would you like to hear how we did something similar five years ago? And why it didn't work.” Not to say it's not relevant now, but let's learn from that lesson and do better this time. Let's appreciate that it's been tried before. That kind of patience and due diligence is missing in a lot of folks' skill sets to understand how things got where they are before they jump to where they should go.

DI: It may be an inherent character flaw of those of us inclined to be change agents. We assume “new” equals “good” and dismiss the past.

JM: Well, as they say: Patience is a virtue. When there's an opportunity for change, the way to do that is to embrace and learn from people with different perspectives and then make the changes together, understanding it's not going to be easy to get it all done in one day, or by one person.

DI: Does embracing history, context, and gradual change imply incremental change and not revolution?

JM: Correct. Our change was not a revolution. A revolution would have been too disruptive. There were revolutionary moments, though. Our former CEO retired fully in 2013, and there have been moments ever since that I have had strong instincts about what to do that were countered by a sense that I didn't have enough experience to fully trust those instincts.

Those feelings were especially present in the early stages of our leadership transition, when we essentially had a three-CEO model. We had a leader for each of our core practice groups and together we formed the Executive Committee, which was equivalent to a Board of Directors at most other firms. I also had an added responsibility as chair of the executive committee, but without title. From a legal perspective, I was also the firm's president, but also did not carry that title. Rather, the three practice group chairs were all referred to as managing principals.

In addition to running the firm, the three of us were expected to maintain a full practice. Let's just say that model didn't work...not only was it bad for my health given the stress of all the hats I was wearing, it was less than ideal in terms of developing and maintaining a strategic direction for the firm at an important point in our evolution.

Fortunately, I was self-aware enough to know that we were going to need some outside help to guide us through the transition. We formed an external advisory committee who helped us understand that the next generation of firm leadership was looking for a new way of working: they wanted to collaborate and be part of a team. To achieve this, we were going to have to let some of our more prolific rainmakers go, because they had developed under a different model that incentivized individual performance over collaboration. That was in 2014, and it was a revolution moment.

Our next step was to name a number of new principals, a majority of which were women to begin to address a gender gap in our leadership. And so, from 2015 to 2018 we thought we were on our way. We'd created this new philosophy around collaboration; we'd established new leadership; and we'd expanded female leadership in the firm. But then, several of female leaders started to leave and we wondered, "What's going on?" It didn't take long before we realized that we had not done all the right work on the sponsorship of our women leaders.

DI: They had position, but lacked authority and support?

JM: Yes. That's how it felt to them, and that's how it played out, despite our best intentions. Reflecting on that, no one advised us to do otherwise. That's a lesson learned. It's got to be deliberate. That's not easy because the best sponsorship happens naturally. There has to be an affinity, a mutual need and desire. In other words, "I want to work with you because I like you, but also because you provide something I don't have. And if I throw you out there, you're going as my protégé, you're going to perform."

That's how it works. You make me look good for having sponsored you, and you benefit from my having sponsored and given you the opportunity. There's a mutual relationship. If you artificially say, "Okay, Michael, we want you to sponsor James." You'll likely say: "I haven't really worked with James, but okay. I'll give it a shot." That strategy does not work, and we still struggle with getting it right. When strong working relationships between people aren't present, sponsorship is a challenge. It's something we're working on.

Another ongoing effort has been establishing a strong sense of identity and culture within our firm. It's become increasingly important for firms to expand beyond their professional identities. Sasaki has always had a strong reputation in the market for the kinds of work that we do, but today, attracting and retaining talent requires that we focus not only on what we do, but how we do it. That's where firm culture comes into play. Ten years ago, we didn't make much as much room as we do now for people at the firm to gather and talk about broader societal issues and how they should influence our way of working.



We were in the habit of having company meetings, when what we really needed were community dialogues.

DI: In reconstituting your leadership meetings, what new form have they taken?

JM: We needed to stop having all-office meetings. We needed to think of them as events, gatherings, so people want to come. There's something to be gained. Something you can't get anywhere else. Not just a one-way flow of information. So, we changed. Initially the format was jarring.

At that time, we were in the early stages of refreshing our

mission statement and had identified four core values for the firm: diverse, curious, strategic, and inspired. We then decided to have four quarterly office events, with each event themed around one of those core values. Each meeting focused on different aspects of our practice that related to diversity, curiosity, strategy, and inspiration. That last one - inspiration - was a year-end celebration of everything we had achieved together: : diverse, curious, strategic, and inspired. So, we decided to have four quarterly events. Each event is going to be themed around one of those core values. Each meeting will focus on something different that relates to diversity, curiosity, strategy, and inspiration.

In some cases, we had facilitators, activities, Legos. All to send the message: “Out with the old, in with the new. Let’s do something completely different.” Office meetings still carry that sense of enthusiasm and excitement. People know there’s going to be something good. There’s a reason to go. And our year-end parties have been a lot of fun and a great expression of who we are as a community at the firm. We’re really looking forward to having those again when the pandemic is over.

DI: Is it accurate to say meetings went from reporting to social and interactive in nature? Not deliberative or decision-making, just the joy of coming together and interacting?

JM: Exactly right. Some information and reporting still happens. But a lot of the reporting had focused on firm operations, financial, HR, reviews, technology. None of it had to do with practice.

It was a deliberate attempt to build in exciting project stories, milestones, celebrations, or focused topics. We did one recently focused on great Zoom interviews, stories, and successes. How do you win an interview remotely? There’s always a theme and a focus on the work. And still a good financial update right up front to give people a sense of where we stand.

DI: Having recently refreshed the firm structure and leadership, are you looking at the next generation of Sasaki leadership yet?



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JM: I get asked this question often. I don’t know yet. Should I know? Maybe I should. But it takes 10 years to do a full transition. I don’t know that I’ll be in this position for another 10 years. Who knows? But I do want to plan for it, because being unprepared is the worst.

The great thing about our current leadership at Sasaki is we’re all young. I’m one of the oldest members of the board of directors, and I’m 46 years old. That says something about the transition we’ve gone through as a firm that has been in the business for almost 70 years. After Hideo Sasaki retired in the 80’s, our last CEO led the firm for over thirty years, before handing over the reins in 2013. In some ways, I feel like I just got to where I am as a leader.

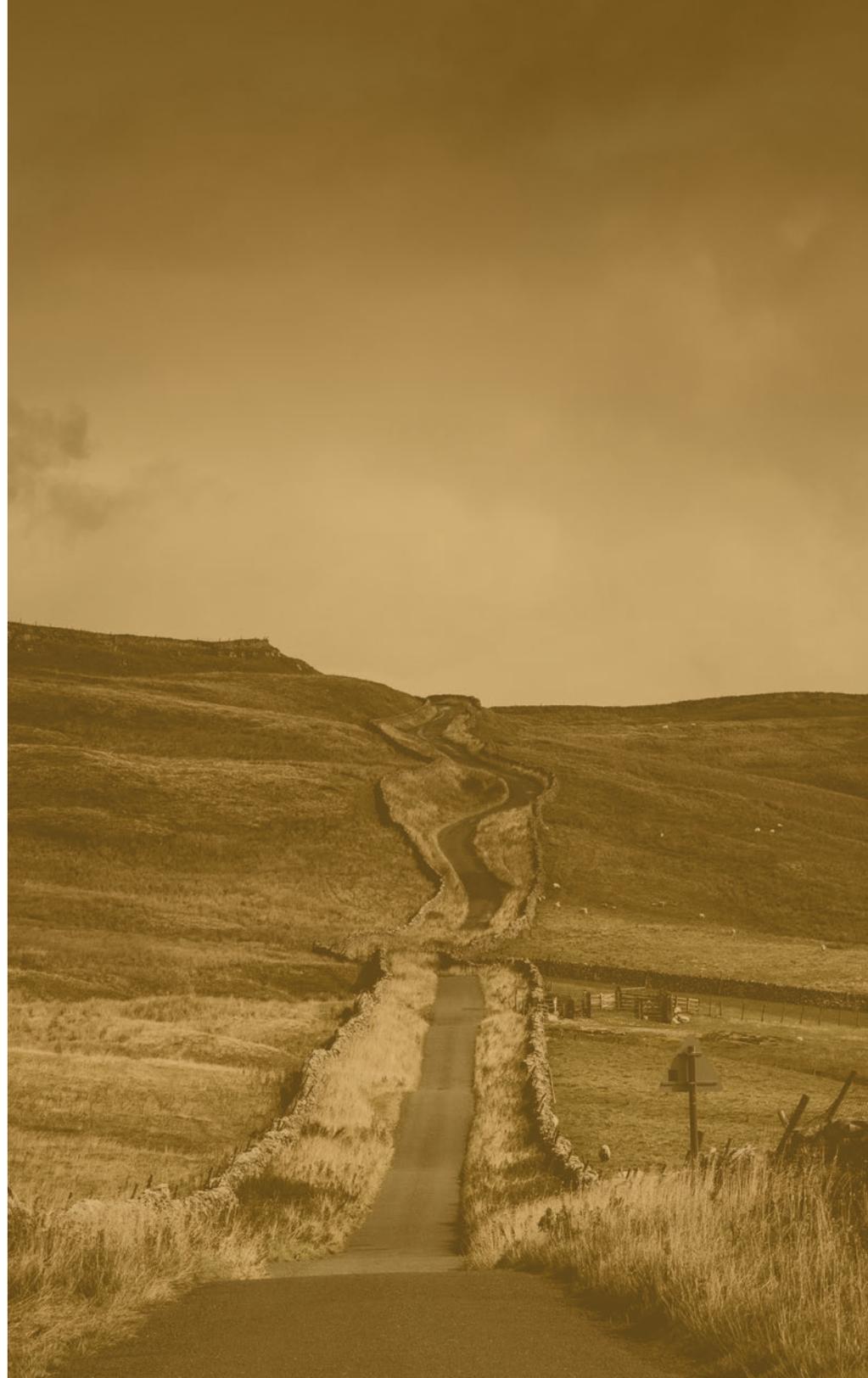
But it has already been over ten years in the making since I was first elected to our board in 2009. I am not wed to any timeframe, but my working assumption is I will only be in my role as CEO for as long as I am the right person for the job. My primary motivation has always been to put the firm first and to put others in a position to succeed, and that is still relevant today. We have now established a model for leadership to turn over more frequently, and that's a good thing.

DI: What are you worried about? Hopeful for?

JM: It's hard not to be worried about politics and the divisive impact it has had on our country over the past year. Our industry is heavily influenced by public policy and the economy, so politics matter.

But I am optimistic 2021 will provide a release of positive energy and pent-up demand for arts, culture, entertainment, and tourism that will be critical in reinvigorating our cities and communities. I am also hopeful we can hold on to some of the more positive things we have recovered during the pandemic — like more time with our families, more time outdoors, and more flexibility to balance the competing demands of work and life.

More recently, I am proud of the effort we have put into maintaining our culture and community at the firm since we started working remotely back in March. Unlike some other places in the country, most everybody at Sasaki has been fully remote since the pandemic began.



For the first ten weeks, I wrote an email every day to the whole office, as a way of keeping in touch and offering encouragement in the earliest phases of our response to COVID-19.

I then transitioned to a weekly email, which I've been doing now for over 30 weeks. People send me interesting links, project updates, shoutouts, and other announcements to include in these messages. It's a way of keeping our community together.

DI: Any regrets?

JM: I wish it didn't take the killings of Ahmad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd for us to come to terms with our collective, long overdue awakening to our industry's role in prolonging systemic racism. I and others at Sasaki have taken time to reeducate ourselves so we can be more comfortable talking about these issues. Even though we're committed to doing the work, we're still only just at the beginning of addressing them.

DI: James, it seems your 100-year evolution, 10-year leadership transformation, and diversity strategies have positioned you well for another 100 years. Thank you for talking with us.

James Miner is Sasaki's Chief Executive Officer. Over the past decade he has helped guide the strategic evolution of the firm. Key efforts have included rebranding the firm to elevate their collaborative and inclusive approach to design, renewing their commitment to being active members of the Boston design community, growing their commercial architecture and interior design practices, establishing a firm-wide research grant program, and adding new expertise around technology, fabrication, and digital design. James is also Chair of the Sasaki Foundation Advisory Council, which brings together leaders across sectors from Greater Boston to help shape the work of the Foundation. The Foundation connects young people to design mentorship and resources and has awarded \$385,000 in grants to research groups that foster diversity and equity in the design field.

As a licensed planner, James's portfolio of work at Sasaki spans all scales and includes urban infill projects, corporate campuses, new communities, strategic land development, and regional planning. James also has significant experience planning for colleges and universities. He holds a Master of Urban Planning from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and a Bachelor of Science in Art and Design from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is an active member of the American Planning Association.