

# KPFF

**A unique approach and an emphasis on providing value are keeping this engineering firm in the black.**

## No Egos in Engineering

**T**he buzzword in architecture and design these days is IPD, or integrated project delivery, which refers to a contractual agreement between all the collaborating parties to focus on the success of the project rather than the individual businesses involved. But for John Gavan and the team at KPFF, this effort to make the design and construction process easier is part of their culture with or without an IPD contract.

“We are involved with an increasing amount of IPD work, but our approach has always been based more on trust and honest communication than contracts,” said Gavan, Managing principal for KPFF’s Los Angeles office. “Instead of sitting down and drawing up a contract that forces a group of business involved in a project to act in a certain way, we believe in sitting down and just agreeing to act a certain way.”

Albert Kelly founded KPFF in Seattle in 1960. Albert Kelly and Associates became Kelly, Pittelko, Fritz, and Forsen and subsequently KPFF in 1976. The 15-office structural and civil engineering consulting firm operates coast to coast in a variety of industries, though the Los Angeles office does mostly healthcare work and is one of the largest offices on the West Coast.

KPFF has been involved in a number of recent projects that have adopted a concept that Gavan refers to as “high performing teams.” He explained from the beginning of such a project, each contributing company is able to share its view of what success will look like when the project opens for business, saying that when everyone understands each other’s motivations, coming to a consensus becomes much easier. He referenced Patrick Lencioni’s book *Five Dysfunctions of a*



*Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) as a roadmap for this approach. The book explains how a foundation of trust overcomes a fear of confrontation, which in turn creates shared accountability and generates great results.

Gavan added that some involved with this concept say they’ve developed their own IPD: inspired project delivery. There’s more to it than that, of course. For example, these projects have a project board of directors: for each new project, the key decision makers from each contributing company agree to meet regularly and guide the project as if it were an independent business.

The best example of this philosophy in action is the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center currently under construction. This major addition to the Thornton Hospital campus associated with the school is ahead of schedule and under budget, which is a feat in its own right but especially considering that after construction began, the client request the addition of another floor.

What might have pushed the project back another year was simply a hiccup for the team of designers and contractors working on the center, who Gavan said just rolled up their sleeves and developed a solution.

This project also saw the first ever application of KPFF’s virtual shop drawing review process. Instead of spending months reviewing the detailed drawings developed by the fabricators on the project, the firm co-located some of its engineers at the fabricators office, enabling them to provide real-time feedback and approval of virtual



**John Gavan, managing principal**

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designs for the project. Gavan said KPFF has maintained a relatively strong financials through the recession as a result of this trust-based approach, saying that it provides clients with greater value in the civil engineering industry, which has become increasing commoditized.

"KPFF has always been about doing whatever it takes to make a project succeed and has built a solid reputation over the years," Gavan said, adding that nearly all the firm's projects comes from repeat business. "In this recession, clients are looking for a true partner to make their significant investment pay off in the long run, so they turn to us."

### Opportunity for growth

Of course, KPFF has been impacted by the recession, which hit the construction industry especially hard. But the firm took the slower pace of work over the last 18 months as an opportunity to strengthen its culture of opportunity. Not to say that it was weak in the first place: Gavan joined the firm as an intern and said the company has always preferred to hire young engineers and bring them up through the ranks.

For many years, KPFF has had an orientation program for new hires called Boot Camp: a two-day program held by senior executives at the firm once a month in a different office. The program is a chance for young people in the company to talk to its leaders and hear from them about KPFF's culture and values. Gavan said as these new hires develop professionally and move into leadership positions, the culture reinforces itself.

Last year, the firm added another program, KPFF 201, for people who have been there for at least five years. This program, which is a two-day, offsite retreat with senior executives, will be another opportunity for the young and eager to meet with the leaders of the firm and talk about what's new and share experiences.

In addition to more cultural training, KPFF also added technical training for internal project management. It also committed to train all of its engineers in Revit, a 3D modeling program that appears to be the way of the future in the construction industry.

"This is another opportunity for us not only to provide our clients with greater value, but to give our engineers a broader skill set," Gavan said.

So is another of the firm's commitments: to enable as many engineers as possible to gain LEED accreditation. So far, several hundred are accredited, up from just a few dozen in 2007. Along with that increase has been an increase in the



number of Gold and Silver LEED-certified projects on KPFF's resume; Gavan highlighted specifically the Palomar Hospital replacement project, which, at 760,000 square feet, is the largest building construction project in California right now.

In addition to a number of sustainable design specifications the project will meet, the 14-story building will have a central garden space on every floor, resulting in vertical garden hundreds of feet high. Gavan said instead of just having a view of nature, patients at the hospital will be within it no matter where they are thanks to these green spaces. But as proud as Gavan is of this and all the projects the teams at KPFF are working on, he emphasized that it never has or ever will be about the individuals at work.

"There are no egos here," he said. "Everyone here is focused on the projects at hand and helping make them successful." +

—Meghan Flynn

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