

# Kephart at 50

The enduring legacy of “architecture for the people”



*Rendezvous Center*



*Riata*

**W**hen you walk into Kephart’s stylish RiNo office, to the right of the reception desk you’ll find The Crash, a large community room now home to a museum-quality 50th anniversary exhibit that celebrates the firm’s storied history of creativity, reliability, innovation and grace.

Five decades and a half-million homes after Mike Kephart first hung his shingle, Kephart has grown to more than 70 employees collaborating with hundreds of clients from their offices in Denver and Phoenix. It has made an indelible mark on the built environment, and it all still happens under Mike’s mantra:

Everyone deserves a well-designed place to live, work and play.

## **The Birth of a Better Way**

It’s 1974.

“The Towering Inferno” and “Blazing Saddles” are playing at the drive-in.

The “Way We Were” drifts out of the radio as Mike Kephart sits at his desk and realizes that his stint at Denver’s O’Rourke Architects has run its course. Already disillusioned with how poorly the staff was treated, his bosses were now placing his biggest client, Carmel Development and Management Co., on the chopping block. Mike knew he had a better way, it was time to prove it.

So, at 34 years old, Mike opened Kephart Associates in a small office on Lincoln Street in Denver.

“He founded the firm with a few reasons in mind,” says Bryce Hall, Kephart’s current president. “One was what he described as ‘architecture for the people,’ meaning everything we do should be focused on the folks who are going to live in our buildings and the community we serve. The other reason was he wanted to create a work environment that was meaningful for the employees.”

Of course, having a vision means little without a client. Luckily, Kal Zeff and the rest of Carmel Development and Management Co. followed Mike out the door, and thus began a client relationship that remains to this very day.

**WORDS:** Kevin Criss



*The Henry*



*The Nicholas*



1990s



2006

Up went Cypress Point Apartments and the Carriage Home at Josephine. Kephart Associates began changing the Front Range landscape, and residential was its polestar.

Quoted at the time, Kephart said, “We are a design firm with a passion for new ideas in housing design and excellence in service.”

At the same time, Kephart was also exploring the symbiotic relationship between building and site.

According to Chris Grady, Kephart’s senior director of land planning, “Mike believed that it’s not just architects designing buildings, it’s not just land planners doing horizontal layouts, it’s about building a sense of community. It goes beyond buildings and site designs, it’s how people live indoors *and* outdoors. So Mike felt the need to develop the land planning component and provide a one-stop shop for our developer-builder friends.”



Chris Grady 2006



2006



2009



2007



2008

Hall adds, "It wasn't about churning out as many homes as possible, it was ensuring that the homes and communities ultimately led to an enjoyable lifestyle for the residents."

"Mike always had a strong passion for residential," says Doug Van Lerberghe, Kephart's director of strategic ventures. "He was a progressive thinker, always figuring out ways to make housing better for the ultimate end-user, always looking to strike a new mold and bring housing forward."

For the next few years, the firm thrived on a steady diet of low-density single-family custom and multifamily, with occasional office build-outs and restaurant remodels. By the time the '80s hit, Kephart Associates had grown to a staff of 42 packed into two Sherman Street offices.

### A New Partner, New Direction & New Challenges

By now, Kephart Associates had earned acclaim for its

distinctive approach to residential design, commitment to sustainability, and unwavering dedication to client satisfaction. To help share the now daunting workload, Paul Campbell was hired in 1983 as a partner to handle more of the business side, while Mike continued to steer the vision and creativity. With Campbell's push, the firm began to pursue high-density projects.

"It was their desire to follow the market," says Hall. "And that allowed us some level of scalability, but also the ability to serve a higher density of folks with that product type. I believe that was a driving motivation for Paul."

While Kephart Associates thrived, the cyclical nature of the economy led to slowdowns and, ultimately, layoffs, the first occurring with Denver's oil bust of the 1980s and again in the '90s. For Mike Kephart, the cuts felt painfully personal.

"It was incredibly hard on him," says Bobby Long, Kephart



2008



2013



2001



Mike and Jaye Kephart 2006

design director. “It was the last thing he would ever want to do because these people are a family. It’s more than a job to us, and when you take that away, when you have to make the hard decisions, it takes a part of your soul with you.”

In 1988, the firm became Kephart Architects, and at one point in the early-1990s, the staff was whittled down to just Mike, his wife, Jaye, Campbell and a part-time drafter. In an effort to rebuild the business, the team built strategic partnerships with complementary firms and began to expand into other markets.

Over the coming years, while its portfolio diversified from sleek urban office spaces to civic centers to charming mountain retreats, each project bore the unmistakable imprint of Kephart’s creativity and its seamless integration of form and function, beauty and practicality, tradition and innovation.

In 2003, with the firm back on solid footing, Mike stepped down, leaving Campbell as sole proprietor and a new name: Kephart Community Planning Architecture.

### Mike Kephart’s Legacy

When it came to building his business, Mike was always focused on nurturing a positive, welcoming culture.

“Mike was an inspirational leader and a fantastic mentor,” says Van Lerberghe. “I attribute my success to his mentorship and his motivation. He was always willing to have a conversation, and you could tell he liked hiring people that knew how to get stuff done.”

“To me the reason that we’ve been able to (thrive) for as long as we have is founded in having a deep understanding of what makes us unique, what our values are and never wavering from that,” says Hall. “We know who we are. We know ourselves to be genuine. We know what we value, and we live that way.”

A key to that understanding is derived from something that Dennis Tallon, Kephart’s executive coach and leadership development consultant, introduced to the team in 1997: The Enneagram Personality Test.

According to Hall, “The test allows us to know ourselves better first ... What are our values? What are our tendencies? But then we also learn about our co-workers. So by knowing the various personality types here in the office, we’re able to have very effective communication.”

Whether it’s this improved understanding of each other, the ESOP, the office/home work choice, the Rockies games or the inviting RiNo digs, the staff loves working at Kephart.

### The Future for Kephart

With a talented team and a solid client roster – 67% of its work is repeat business – the trend line for the future is definitely headed in a positive direction. Staying true to Mike Kephart’s founding vision is the blueprint to keep it moving forward.

“It’s about keeping that family feel,” says Van Lerberghe. “Keep people vested in what we do by making them part of it. And be flexible, don’t get stuck in the way you did it before. Sometimes you [have got to] break your own mold to make sure you’re staying two steps ahead of the competition.”

When I ask Paul Campbell, two years retired but still offering encouragement to the firm, about Kephart’s future, he echoes Van Lerberghe.

“[We can’t rest] on our laurels,” says Campbell. “It’s tempting to have a run of success and coast for a bit. Kephart has seen a number of ups and downs, so it knows to always be improving. Whether that be an investment in people, in technology, in developing market share, Kephart does not stand still.”

The people wouldn’t have it any other way. \\