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Image Courtesy of Clearstory



By Meghan Hall

San Francisco-based Kate Keating Associates has been in the AEC business for more than two decades and has been a pivotal part of many major commercial projects throughout the Bay Area. The firm, through its wayfinding and placemaking practices, has quite literally left its stamp on the projects it has worked on. Now, to celebrate its 25th year in business, a leadership change and its plans for the future, Kate Keating Associates has rebranded, becoming Clearstory Wayfinding + Placemaking.

"We specialize in placemaking and wayfinding, and our work is really architectural rooted," explained Clearstory's President Julie Vogel. "It is typically within a significant public space and is really part of an architecturally cohesive environment; it is contributing to public spaces that we as residents of the Bay Area and visitors and tourists all share. That is kind of the corner stone. Whether it is a medical environment or civic courthouse or a cruise terminal, they are places where we really all come together as a community and citizens."

The decision to move forward with a new name arose out of Clearstory's desire to better describe its place in the AEC community as a firm that works to tell the story of a project, its mission and its structure.

"We really felt the name is forward looking," Vogel continued. "...It reflects that our work is really seeded in the architectural community and architectural world. But it also, in a more conceptual way, talks about how we make an environment, [how] we help clients and owners create environments that are easy to navigate and legible and tell the story of the place, whether it is a route through a building or the history of an institution. We help bring that story to life."

Additionally, Vogel notes, the name Clearstory grew through the team's effort to convey its clients' vision and create integrated experiences for end-users. The clarity that arises as a result from close collaboration with project teams and developers is something that Clearstory is striving to bring to the entire project process as it embraces its new name.

"Projects are big and complex, and we help really big institutions make complex environments clear," said Vogel. "We're trying also to bring that clarity to the actual design process in how we present our materials, in how we present our work and how we communicate to our clients. That is also a part of the forwardness of the name."

Over the course of the firm's tenure in the industry, Clearstory has tackled several major projects, including The Presidio Tunnel Tops Park, which the firm has worked on for several years, the Grand Hyatt at San Francisco International Airport, San Francisco International Airport Boarding Area B and The Anderson Collection at Stanford.



Julie Vogel (Left) and Nikki San Miguel (Right)

Vogel, and Clearstory Principal Nikki San Miguel, also highlighted that working on the 530,000 square foot expansion of the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford in Palo Alto as one project that particularly stood out.

"A project that is really close to our hearts is the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital," stated Miguel. "We started the project back in 2011 and worked really closely with the owners and architects to support their vision...We were able to touch many surfaces and not just the signage. Through that we were able to build a really lasting relationship with the client; they really value patient care and the family experience, so everything we did had that backbone."

The children's hospital was completed in 2017, and Clearstory's work is evident on all floors; the firm contributed many of the interior finishes including wall graphics—which reflected the floors' varying Californian eco-regions of redwoods, desert, the rocky shore and others—as well as signage, wall coverings and ceiling coverings.

As Clearstory looks forward to its next 25 years in the business, Vogel and San Miguel hope that the firm will tackle a more diverse array of projects. While Vogel did not specify what types of projects Clearstory would pursue, she emphasized that the team would remain open to whatever opportunities come their way—an important characteristic given the architecture industry's rapidly evolving climate over the past decade.

"I think the way [the industry] has changed the most in my career is that architecture was more about the space, and now it is more about the people that occupy or experience the space," said Vogel. "It is becoming more about the people and less about the architecture for architecture's sake."

The 15-person, woman-owned firm was originally founded in 1995 by Kate Keating, a known innovator in the environmental graphic design community. Keating is credited with many accomplishments in the industry, including Universal Wayfinding, a system that provides legible wayfinding and signage in setting for those with limited English proficiency.

"As our communities became more diverse, creating messaging that is understood by more than just English language speakers, bringing clear and visible messages that speaks to all cultures, is very important," said San Miguel.

When Kate Keating retired in 2017, Vogel stepped into her now role as president. Vogel originally joined Kate Keating Associates in 1997 as a designer and project manager. San Miguel, a project manager and designer, also became a principal in 2017.

Since then, the transition has been fairly easy according to the pair, and the change of name was icing on the cake. The new name was introduced this year, in part, because the firm worked on the rebrand internally while also focusing on other client projects.

"[It] slows down the process, but it has also helped crystallize what [the transition] all means for us," said Vogel. "When we had the transition back in 2017, it was not very eventful; there was not a big jolt. It's all been very smooth, and it's because established by Kate, there is a strong attitude toward nurturing the staff. That is something she established in both of us, making sure that people are challenged and they have some place to go. That is something that we continue to run on, and it's been a really great transition. We are still having fun!"

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