



*In conversation with Nicholas James, founder
and director of KAST architects.*

There was no big plan when it came to KAST, it very much happened by accident as Nicholas explains when I speak to him.

My wife was diagnosed with cancer and so I decided to step back from my role as a director of a large practice to dedicate more time to caring for her and our two young boys. KAST emerged out of a simple need to keep working, but in a way that could be moulded around our needs as a family at that time. Seven years on, Claire is fit, healthy and has been given the all clear, the boys are running rings around me and slowly but surely KAST has grown in size and reputation. Even now, though, the way that we work ensures that time with family and friends comes first."

Can you tell me about how the creative process at KAST work?

We strongly feel that design should be a collaborative process and are lucky to have some wonderfully creative people at KAST, all of whom have a voice and a passion for good architecture. Alvar Aalto once said "you can't chew pencils and spit ideas" and as with most things he was right. Design is something that you need to work at and very rarely do you arrive at the perfect solution at the first attempt. It is an iterative process, one that requires analysis of different options and a

great deal of questioning and testing. We value the people that we collaborate with and try to engender a culture of respect and openness, of finding solutions rather than highlighting problems and of positivity and laughter. In short, we work hard to ensure that the people we work with enjoy the experience and the end result makes our clients smile.

What drives KAST's designs and do you have a signature style?

Sustainability underpins, over-arches and threads through our approach to each project. It is fully integrated within the design process and therefore neither dominates our work, nor is it left to chance. For us it is about how can we design in such a way as to minimise our impact on the planet, through our choice of materials and the energy efficiency of the building. Sometimes it is about questioning whether there is a need for a building at all.

Where does the design inspiration for each new project come from?

We believe that it is important to design in response to a site's surroundings and context rather than merely reflect the look of adjacent buildings. Superficial 'styles' come and go so we work hard to understand the essence of the place, its history and evolution. With much of Cornwall falling within designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, we

strive to ensure our designs respect the landscape through their form, mass and choice of materials. The coastline, hills, valleys and rivers will be here long after our houses are gone, so we have to remember that we are temporarily borrowing the sites that we build on.

You have recently become B Corp certified, can you tell me about this and how it aligns with your commitment to reducing the impact to the planet?

Certified B Corporations, or B Corps, are companies that meet high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability. The certification process measures a company's entire social and environmental impact.

We have therefore joined a family of like-minded companies, many of whom are our sustainability heroes. Collectively we believe that people and place are of the utmost importance. We are all interdependent and therefore responsible for each other and the generations to come.

When we started KAST, we knew we wanted to run a company that, at its core, had a desire to design and build more sustainably. We have also always believed in the importance of staff health and wellbeing and how essential it is to strike a balance that puts home life over work life. For seven years we have felt in our heart that we were working in the right ways but had no real hard and fast method to demonstrate it.

The B Corp Impact Assessment enabled us for the first time to measure this in a meaningful way. It also highlighted areas where we could

improve as a company in the way we look after our co-workers and manage our customers, engage with our local community and increase our environmental awareness.

So, being B Corp certified is a huge honour for us, but it is also just the beginning of our journey to continually progress, putting people and the environment first, collectively working to redefine what it means to be successful in business.

The housing market in Cornwall is somewhat incongruous and there can be a tension between the building of multi-million pound homes and affordable housing. How do you feel about this?

We are so fortunate to live in a beautiful part of the world and it is only natural for people to want to visit. Over the last few years, and in particular as a result of the pandemic, more and more people have chosen to holiday in Cornwall. As a result many homes have been removed from private rent and are now holiday lets, more people have chosen to relocate to the county and some have bought a second home here. House prices have risen, fewer homes are available to rent and therefore local people are finding it harder to stay and live in the county. Businesses are losing staff who are moving away due to limited affordable housing and communities are losing their soul.

As an architect, being asked by a client to design a new high value house could potentially put us in an uncomfortable position. However, given our approach to design, and a passion for putting people and planet first, we feel there is always an opportunity for us to test our sustainable design skills and have a positive impact. Often clients come to us because they





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want to achieve the highest environmental standards, but for some this is not so high on their list of priorities. Our challenge is therefore to bring them on a journey and persuade them of the benefits in building more sustainably.

Addressing this challenge then enables us to use the same approach in our designs for affordable and social housing. Millions of households in the UK are being dragged into fuel poverty. Cold homes can lead to damp and mould problems which then contribute to respiratory infections and illness, not to mention the impacts on residents mental health. We can apply our knowledge of designing highly insulated, air-tight and energy efficient homes to the social housing projects in the county that we are currently working on, while also creating beautiful homes and sustainable communities.

Being put in an uncomfortable position needs to be embraced. It challenges us to question whether we are doing the right thing in any given situation. I would be more worried if we were becoming complacent about the work that we do. So for us it is about searching for that balance to enable us to design for those who want a dream home and those who dream of affording a home.

From your point of view, what are the overall responsibilities of an architect for society and environment?

When I was younger, someone at university put it to me that architects were little more than professional vandals. That stuck with me and of course, in a sense, he was right. We

have a huge duty of care and responsibility to look after our planet and the moment we start digging in the ground we are impacting on our environment.

We are in a climate emergency and we urgently need to reduce carbon emissions. At KAST we are committed to designing in a way that touches the earth lightly, minimising our use of high embodied carbon materials such as concrete and steel and moving towards a more timber based method of construction. We also focus on the energy efficiency of our designs (factoring in orientation, solar gain, insulation levels and air-tightness) to ensure that the operational carbon demands are reduced.

So our task is to design sensitively, to ensure that any impact is minimised and that the resulting building sits in harmony with its surroundings and benefits the wider community.

What does meaningful architecture mean to you?

I hope that our buildings are meaningful on a number of levels. Firstly, that they are visibly simple, humble and sustainable, carrying the meaning wrapped up in our ethos, and secondly that they carry meaning for our clients, in that they are specific to their bespoke needs, family structure and life experiences. Ultimately our buildings are the background and structure onto which our clients add meaning over the course of a life spent in them.

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