



INTERVIEW...

KAST Architects

A desire to find the perfect work life balance has led to a studio that champions a happy work environment



Why did you set up KAST? *There was no big plan – it very much happened by accident. My wife was taken seriously ill and so I decided to step back from my role as a director of a large practice in Bristol 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.*

What does sustainability mean to you? *Sustainability underpins, over-arches and threads through our approach to every project. It is fully integrated within our design process and so neither dominates our work, nor is it left to chance. For us it is about how we can 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 if there is a need for a building at all.*

What role does the landscape play in your design process? *We believe that it is important to design in response to the wider 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.

Why do you choose to use so much timber in your work? *Using wood instead of other materials saves CO2 emissions, both through the carbon captured and stored in the wood product and the avoidance of alternative CO2 intensive materials. We constantly analyse our designs to find ways to reduce our reliance on steel and concrete and use more natural alternatives. There are also a wide range of academic studies on how the use of timber in buildings can be good for our health and wellbeing. There is evidence that it positively influences creativity, helps us stay focused, enhances our mood, lowers stress, increases productivity, improves air quality and stabilises humidity. But putting the science to one side, it is a beautiful material to work with. The variety of species, textures, grain and colours all combine to provide us as architects with an exciting and diverse palette to work with.*

What would you say has been the biggest challenge so far? *Learning how to say no! Our natural inclination is to say yes to any job that comes along. However, we have learned that there are times when we may not be the best option for a new client. It may be that the timing doesn’t work or that we are just too busy. You don’t want to let your existing clients down by spreading*

yourself too thin. Or it may be that the work doesn’t quite fit your particular skillset, in which case we will point people towards other practices who we feel would be a good match. There is an unhealthy expectation in the profession that it is okay to work overtime, to do all-nighters, to work all weekend. KAST was set up to fit around family life, not the other way round. Protecting the wellbeing of our colleagues is critical in how we operate as a practice. We do our best work when we are happy and feeling fresh.

What is your favourite part of the design process and why? *I honestly don’t know. It could be that moment when you sit down with a clean sheet of paper and start to address a new brief. Or perhaps it is the time when a client responds to your proposals with a healthy thumbs up. We really enjoy seeing our designs come to life, working with skilled contractors to realise those initial ideas which have been refined and honed through the technical design stages. Seeing our clients living in their new home, sharing a glass of wine with them on their roof terrace and hearing how their lives have changed as a result of your work is extremely rewarding.*

Where do you see KAST Architects ten years from now? *If we can continue to deliver beautiful and sustainable buildings for our clients, do that in a stress free and happy environment and spend as much time as possible with our family, that’ll do for me.*