

INNOVATION INSPIRATION: DEVELOPER BEN KAISER

Hear from a Portland architect and developer who's making an old material new again.



Ben Kaiser, the owner and principal of Portland's [Kaiser Group](#) and [PATH Architecture](#), is a bit of a lightning rod. To some, he's the jerky developer who's demolishing Portland neighborhoods and putting up useless condos; to others, he's the forward-thinking architect behind our city's most sustainable building – an 85-footer that could help revive the state's timber industry and make a dent in global warming. (Governor Kate Brown is in the latter camp.) We spoke with Kaiser about what inspires him and his vision for Portland's future. Read on, and decide for yourself.

What makes PATH different from other architecture firms?

We only work on our own development projects. Our motto is "develop, design, build." This means that as architects we need to integrate the entire development cost – land, construction, idea, market, etc. – into our thinking as we design.

What are some projects you've worked on that you're especially proud of?

The Radiator building is the first tall-timber building built in Oregon in over 100 years. It has the country's first private earthquake early warning system installed. We're also just now wrapping up the tallest timber and cross laminated timber (CLT) building in the country, Carbon12. It's the absolute leader in sustainability – carbon sequestration – and seismic preparedness in the US. A visit to the innovative Bullitt Center in Seattle started our journey to build with wood as a structural system for tall buildings.

In addition to using wood, what are your efforts toward sustainability?

Our entire focus – from rotating houses (359), to carbon sequestering renewable structural cores – is about sustainability and energy conservation. In fact, LEED is well behind in their metrics since they have yet to integrate a building's structural cores into their measurements. We've realized that the core of our Carbon12 project sequesters about 21 years of carbon (ahead) as compared to a new LEED-rated structure.

What’s your background, and how’d you get interested in architecture?

I grew up building as a teenager in Cleveland: decks, docks, and fences. I went to college at the Rhode Island School of Design to study architecture. And my brother and I flipped houses on the east coast to pay for college.

What’s your favorite building in Portland?

I really like the Union Bank Tower downtown and Kengo Kuma's project at the Portland Japanese Garden.

You’ve been a bit of a lightning rod in developing NE/North Portland. What’s your take on the debate, and on what the city needs in terms of housing for the coming years?

We need to start listening to neighborhoods and stop listening to neighbors. We can't give up our city's long-held visions of density and urban corridors simply because a neighbor or two is upset or someone else loses a parking place. Trust me, people are not attracted to Portland because of ample parking. The folks who established the Urban Growth Boundary and sought to keep the cores dense and commutes short would be extremely upset to see our City Council backing away from density objectives simply because a (very) few who were vociferous in their opposition.



Rendering of the innovative Carbon12 building in NE Portland.

How do you think the buildings of the future will be different than they are today?

A massive shift is imminent on three fronts. Engineered timber products will have a significant impact on the built environment within five years, depending on the economic cycle. Our downtowns across the United States will see more and more tall-wood structures that are irrefutably superior in every way, particularly environmentally speaking, than the other options. With climate change the most significant issue of our time, it is imperative that we all contribute what we can to the solution.

The second radical transformation to our cities and the built environment will be driverless cars. Buildings will change, roads will change, and the job market will face a massive disruption for trucking and deliveries. The costs that we incur as cities to maintain parking spaces, lots, garages, real estate, etc., will be soon dedicated to more beneficial use.

Preparing for potential earthquakes brings me to the third point of imminent transformation. We will soon stop with the notion and expectation that existing buildings should alone solve the problems of potential earthquakes. No one would ever suggest we make

the Midwest "tornado proof" but somehow we expect our buildings to be "earthquake proof." CoreFirst is our way of reinforcing existing buildings. The thinking is that we should stop the practice of "drop, cover, and hold on" – a truly static response – and supplant that with a mobile-based response. Pairing that with constructed safe areas within existing older structures will dramatically lower the costs of providing safety if a large earthquake ever occurs here in the NW within our lifetimes. By the way, a kid's desk will not provide safety within an existing unreinforced masonry structure during a 9.0 earthquake.

We recently permitted the first installation of CoreFirst right down the street from Nike. In fact, in your old WHQ! Your original building is now the German International School and they are the first to adopt a completely different – and much, much less expensive – way to deal with the possibility of a large earthquake hitting the Northwest with CoreFirst.

Does being in the Pacific Northwest influence your design sensibility?

Yes. Wood, wood, wood. We are a town, and a country, that has wood as its most sustainable and renewable natural resource. We can no longer look to other parts of the world to solve our energy needs. We should no longer ruin other country's environments (oil, mining, etc.), in order to maintain "our way of life." We need to bring energy use onto our shores and thereby understand the impacts – and solve them accordingly.

Trees are renewable. They sequester carbon and provide building materials. They are 80% lighter than concrete and therefore far better in seismic regions such as ours. Well-managed forests, national and private, are better for the environment than un-managed forests in terms of forest fires, beetle infestation, and drought damage. The use of engineered timber products also assist in the efforts to bridge the rural/urban divide that has polarized our country. We need to stop turning our backs on the middle of our state – and our country – and better engage them in our solutions.

What does innovation in architecture mean to you?

To consider that architecture has the ability to do so much more than we give it credit for. It can take care of us when we aren't in it (texting from early earthquake warning systems), it can actually reduce our carbon footprint (wood structural systems), it can introduce us to better light and air quality, and it can solve affordability issues.

Check out more about the innovative Carbon12 building [here](#).