



Media release: 21 May 2020

Judi Keith-Brown is new President of the Institute of Architects

Wellington architect Judi Keith-Brown is the new President of Te Kāhui Whaihanga New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA).

Keith-Brown is the third female president of the NZIA, which was established in 1905 to represent architects and promote the cause of architecture in New Zealand. The 4,500-strong membership of the NZIA includes more than 90 percent of the country's registered architects, along with hundreds of students and graduates.

Keith-Brown succeeds Auckland architect Tim Melville as NZIA President. She takes up her two-year role at a testing time for her profession, the wider construction industry and the whole economy.

“Over the past two months architects, along with our clients, have had to adapt to our immediate Covid circumstances,” Keith-Brown says, “but we have also had time to reflect on the wider issues affecting our lives and work.”

“Of course, we are not alone in this. All around the country, people will have been thinking about their homes and their workplaces, their communities and cities.”

“The lockdown showed New Zealanders really care about this place and about each other,” Keith-Brown says. “This level of commitment is reflected in the huge social and economic investment the government has announced.”

“As President of the NZIA, I will be advocating for sustainable outcomes from the building programme undertaken by the government, and by private developers.”

“The NZIA’s members are eager to contribute their design skills and problem-solving abilities to help clients realise projects of enduring value.”

Keith-Brown says it is essential that the investment in public and private housing produces good results for individuals and communities.

“Most of my own work has been residential, and I have always thought our houses are our most important buildings,” Keith-Brown says. “After the lockdown, I believe this even more strongly.”

“I’ve been getting calls from clients who have been spending a lot of time in their houses, and are very glad they have houses they enjoy being in.”

“This should be the goal for all the housing we design and build in New Zealand.”

Keith-Brown brings a broad range of experiences and achievements to her position as NZIA President. A graduate of the School of Architecture at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), Keith-Brown was employed by an architecture firm in the capital before living for three years in Glasgow, where she worked on large public housing projects.

On her return to Wellington, Keith-Brown practised as an architect, taught at the VUW School of Architecture for 10 years and, with her husband Ewan Brown, also an architect, raised two young sons.

Keith-Brown says her experience in balancing professional and family responsibilities has strengthened her determination to promote the advancement of females in the architecture profession.

For the past decade, Keith-Brown has run her own architecture practice in a collaborative working space she established a decade ago and, which, she says, is proving to be an effective model for a Covid-era office environment.

Keith-Brown has also served as an assessor and convenor for the New Zealand Registered Architects Board and continued to review the projects of VUW architecture students.

Keith-Brown cites two Wellington architects, the late Ian Athfield and Bill Alington, as influences on her career.

“I admired Ath for the humanity of his architecture, and Bill for his carefully considered and modest designs. He has been a true mentor for many of us.”

As for architectural sites that have made an impression on her, Keith-Brown says she has been fortunate to visit such inspiring buildings as Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Hill House in Scotland, Oscar Niemeyer's blue church in Brasilia and the Chagall chapel at the United Nations in New York, the Eames House in Los Angeles and Harry Seidler's house for his mother in Sydney.

"But most recently, I've really liked an Eastbourne house alteration by Wellington architect Liz Wallace for a disabled client who is permanently housebound. Liz's design allows light from a turquoise-tiled pool to play on the ceiling of the room in which the client spends most of her time."

"It is such a beautiful space, and for me this project is a wonderful demonstration of the difference architects can make to the lives of the people they work for," Keith-Brown says.

"It is an outstanding example of the professional service I will champion in my term as President of the Institute of Architects."

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