

Architects FORA

Everybody deserves a place to call home



“We had a session and it was just, yes, from the first meeting of all three of us were like, this is the thing, this is happening. Then it was a very, very fast process between the decision of doing it and actually doing it.”

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT?

Sarah Vaccaro (SV):

I fell in love with architecture in junior high. My mom studied industrial design and had a drafting table where I would sketch my dream house. I loved the combination of art, creativity, math, and logic, plus the strategy behind the design process. I got lucky falling into something at an early age that I ended up being well-suited for.

Kate Conley (KC):

While visiting my aunt in Atlanta, I saw two towers that locals call the king and queen buildings. It clicked that humans intentionally make buildings to represent something. I wanted to be the person who put that mark on the landscape. My thinking has evolved since then—it's not just about placing a building permanently, but making intentional decisions about what we put in our environment.

Leah Bayer (LB):

I didn't know anything about architecture until high school. I took an aptitude test when applying to colleges, and my physics professor asked if I had read *The Fountainhead*. I'm not sure what it says about me that I read that book and said, “yeah, I'll be an architect!” And then the aptitude test results suggested architecture, so that's how I decided. I was drawn to the combination of space creation, art, and science, and I was a fort builder as a child, so making big forts made sense to me.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR CAREER PATH AND THE POSITIONS YOU'VE HELD.

KC: I started working on affordable housing in Southern California before moving to Northern California to work with Sarah for five years on university residence halls. Then I worked at Foster and Partners doing high-end design, particularly Apple projects, which was fascinating. I stayed three and a half years because I had more opportunity to be self-determined than expected. Eventually, I took a role with LPA in Silicon Valley working on tech campuses, before joining OJK (now FORA) in leadership with Sarah and Leah. My path has been about pursuing new challenges and experiences.

LB: After architecture school, I wasn't sure I wanted to practice traditional architecture but did want to get licensed. I worked at a small firm in Mountain View focused on multi-family housing and residential work. But I always knew I wanted to run my own business—both my parents were entrepreneurs, so I had that bug. A few years into practicing I was ready to jump in when a mentor said, "if you want to run an empire then you should go work for an empire and see how that works." So I joined Perkins and Will for about a year, learning how a large firm operates and integrates research.

Unexpectedly, someone reached out to me about designing houses on their land in Hawaii. I flew out on a weekend and did some feasibility studies and then decided that this was the time to jump. I built a team of five women. Then serendipitously met Sarah and Kate. We went on this crazy adventure, merging OJK and my practice together. It was a wild path.

SV: Kate and I graduated from Cal Poly in 2009 during the Great Recession when jobs were scarce. I was fortunate to find work at a firm doing public school projects—one of the few sectors with available funding. I stayed there for ten years, gaining experience in various public education projects while developing my design skills and leadership abilities.

After ten years, I was at a crossroads between advancing at that firm or exploring something new. I chose to leave and went through an exploratory process, including pro-bono work with a non-profit, CityTeam, who provide a range of services to low-income families and people experiencing homelessness. This experience showed me how much I value mission alignment with clients and knowing them personally.

I wanted to continue as an architect while addressing the housing crisis. I found OJK Architecture and Planning in San Jose, led by Jerry King. Despite the firm not hiring at the time, I found a way to push my way in the door. After six months, Jerry offered me a path to firm leadership and ownership. This coincided with COVID, when I met Leah through a partnership between our firms.

LB: The team I had built for the Hawaii project was fully remote, which I did intentionally after hearing stories of women, caregivers, and non-traditional architects struggling to find their place in the industry. And selfishly, I wanted to start a family and wanted more flexibility in where and how to raise a child. So I decided to start this remote practice that would give me the lifestyle that I wanted. When COVID hit, we were unaffected logistically, but our projects paused, and my senior architect needed more work. She interviewed with OJK and joined their team.

She saw OJK had plenty of work but needed help transitioning to remote operations. We proposed an exchange: we would help them set up remote systems while working as an extended team on their projects, particularly with Sarah on affordable housing. It worked great! It was super fun, our team loved it, and it felt like it was answering some of the questions that we asked at a recent retreat about how we can make a bigger impact on the world. Working on affordable housing, we thought, "oh, this is it."

LB: After six months, Sarah and I started having these casual conversations about practice and architecture and what we were doing and why. One day she mentioned the owner of OJK wanted to retire and asked if I wanted to buy the firm together, along with her best friend and awesome architect, Kate. From our first meeting, all three of us knew this was the right move. Then it was a very, very fast process between the decision of doing it and actually doing it.

KC: Our connection was strengthened by a network of supportive women in AIA Silicon Valley. Leadership feels less daunting with the right partners who complement your strengths and weaknesses. When talking to others our age receiving firm leadership offers, our first question is always, “Who are you doing this with?” Your partners are everything—I don’t recommend doing it alone.

SV: When Jerry first proposed the idea of passing on the firm, I had no intention of owning a firm. After meeting Leah, with her skills in team building and operations, this changed my perspective. Kate and I had known each other for years, and when I mentioned this opportunity to her, she immediately wanted to join. It suddenly became clear this was our path forward.

We quickly negotiated with Jerry, allowing him to step into retirement while honoring his 40-year legacy. As we stepped into this next chapter of the firm, we rebranded from OJK Architecture & Planning to Architects FORA, centering our name on our mission to be a firm FOR A restorative process, collaborative approach, resilient future, empowered community, for all.

LB: Partnership is crucial. I started alone and found it really hard and stressful. I never considered partnership until this opportunity came up. I had concerns about losing control but recognized my limitations and the potential for something bigger than myself, by partnering with women that had incredible strengths where I had weaknesses.

The transition from the traditional model of one person leading a firm to a collective of women taking over represents an important and really beautiful shift in architecture. True leadership functions as a collaborative effort—it’s too much for one person to serve clients and teams effectively alone. I feel incredibly lucky that this came to be.

SARAH VACCARO **BIGGER THAN ME**

“I deeply value aligning with the clients we work with and knowing them very personally. That’s what makes our role as architects really meaningful.”



DID YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BE LEADERS, OR HAS IT EVOLVED THROUGH YOUR FRIENDSHIP?

SV: I never specifically wanted to own a firm, but leadership is different. While I didn't consciously seek leadership, I was likely destined for it given my natural inclination to take charge and my passion for vision and big-picture thinking. These qualities have driven me into leadership positions regardless of intention. I'm grateful this opportunity arose, as the impact we can have within our firm, with clients, and in the broader architectural industry by doing things differently has been exciting.

KC: I've always been thrust into leadership roles—I was definitely called “bossy” growing up. I never imagined being a firm owner; the traditional networking and business development model seemed foreign and unappealing. In conflicts with previous firm owners, I often thought, “I should be in charge” to create a space where decisions worked for people like us.

I should have been pushing toward ownership, but it wasn't presented as a real possibility. Having outside leadership opportunities like WIA helped. There are natural leaders who are most comfortable in that role, natural followers equally vital to the process, and those who can move between roles. I'm a terrible follower but comfortable pushing, leading, and setting direction.

Being a firm owner takes less mental energy than trying to influence change from below. We can have a 20-minute conversation and establish policy instead of forming committees and having recommendations ignored. That's why we're vocal about being female firm owners—we want others to see themselves in us and know there are alternatives to being “someone's good little soldier.”



KATE CONLEY
HAPHAZARD

“Leadership feels easy and less daunting when you have the right partners, partners who you feel are going to pick up where you're weak and you can be strong where they're weak.”



LEAH BAYER **DETERMINED**

“You’re not gonna be happy and you’re not gonna succeed if you’re trying to lead like someone else.”

HOW HAVE YOU WEATHERED THE ECONOMIC CYCLES?

KC: Graduating in 2009 was brutal. Many in our cohort didn’t enter architecture because there were no jobs. I got hired because a family friend took pity on me, initially as an office manager before they discovered I could draft. The scrappiness of those who survived that period defines our generation and has made us, as leaders, more risk-averse. We’re careful planners regarding finances because we know the bottom can fall out anytime. Young people starting practices now have only known boom times—it’s not always like this.

LB: I didn’t actually have to deal with it. I had a quarter-life crisis and dropped out of engineering school during the recession, reevaluating my path and taking art classes and teaching myself coding while living with my mother.

After reading about biomimicry and watching a whole bunch of sci-fi, I thought maybe I could do architecture but in a different way. So I went back to school and transferred majors. By graduation, the economy had improved.

I learned about risk another way, though: through the Hawaii project. When the client suddenly shifted focus to reforestation and canceled the housing development, we were left without any work. ***That’s what taught me the importance of making sure you’re not investing all of yourself and your business in one thing and to constantly be thinking about the implications - what if something happens?*** It was a terrifying experience I never want to repeat.

SV: Graduating during the recession, I joined a firm that survived by diversifying project types and clients. They had residential, higher education, and K-12 public school work, which carried them through. This instilled in me the importance of variety to weather economic fluctuations.

Interestingly, FORA takes a different approach. We’re housing-focused experts committed to addressing the housing crisis at all scales—from ADUs to single-family homes, apartment retrofits, affordable housing complexes, as well as market-rate developments. Our strategy is providing services across these scales with different client types in multiple geographic locations, with Kate in Colorado, Leah in Washington, and me in California.

Leah brought another dimension by expanding our scope of services. The architect’s role has been traditionally limited, but we can do more to positively impact outcomes. This includes community engagement before design begins, post-occupancy evaluation to understand what works and what doesn’t, and research specialities that directly influence our work in housing. We are constantly considering how to build community among people from different backgrounds, and what the architect’s role should be after construction.

DID YOU HAVE MENTORS THAT HELPED YOU?

LB: The Women In Architecture network was huge for leadership development and support. It's a powerful group of professional women lifting each other up and ensuring everyone succeeds. The cohort I started with are all essentially in leadership positions now.

I met incredible women architects who led their own practices and guided me along my own path to firm leadership. Their "I'm going to do it my way" attitude and success was so inspiring to me. Whenever I felt stuck in my career I would meet an incredibly strong woman who reminded me - "You can do things your own way. Everyone has their own path. Follow your gut and keep moving forward".

Fun fact: Kate was a panelist at one of my first Women In Architecture events.

KC: I'd echo the Women In Architecture network. At a Women In Construction forum, a speaker said, "No one has to consent to be your mentor. Take what you like from each leader and put it in your toolbox." This resonated because I wasn't formally seeking mentorship but absorbed qualities I admired.

One project manager, a general contractor, gave a master class in "control with kindness" and client management. I absorbed everything he did. It came at the right moment when I was the main point of contact, and having this example from outside architecture provided concrete lessons I might not have gotten otherwise. Taking mentors from other industries is crucial.

SV: I've drawn from various professional and personal influences. The principal I worked with for 10 years instilled a high level of trust in me, which allowed me to grow through taking on new responsibilities. He taught me that being an architect and guiding people through the design process is almost as important as the end product of the building.

I had project managers who were skilled at letting people figure things out independently—something I'm not naturally good at but essential for growth. I also had a non-architect mentor with deeply aligned personal values who helped me think beyond immediate situations to consider our broader role as architects and people.

Jerry was a brief but important mentor who took a chance on me and taught me a lot about multifamily affordable housing. When taking over FORA, I received formal mentorship through The Coaching Fellowship, which pairs women in change-making roles with mentors worldwide, this was hugely beneficial as we were in the growing pains of learning to run a small business.

KC: Based on Sarah's experience, Leah and I both got leadership coaches. For any new firm owner, that's the number one recommendation—a neutral third party who helps you navigate unfamiliar situations like deciding whether to let someone go. It's like therapy. I had six sessions that transformed my outlook, and I still check in quarterly.

LB: My leadership coach and I met weekly for seven months before he sadly passed away. He was such a great resource for me because I quickly realized, when you own the firm, there's no one above you guiding you along anymore. You can learn from other firm owners, but they are often struggling with the same issues that you have. Working with a professional coach was an invaluable experience.

DID YOU ALL GO TO THE SAME COACH?

LB: All different. I think that's really important.

KC: It's beneficial to have different perspectives. My mentor introduced the concept of "beneficial struggle" and questioned whether it's fair to expect everyone on your team to be exceptional. Outside opinions are valuable—like having shadow partners.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY AT ANY POINT IN YOUR PATH?

KC: No, not about this.

SV: Not a thing.

LB: Nothing truly. There were really, really difficult times along the path, but they were incredibly valuable and brought me here, and I'm so happy to be here.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES AN ARCHITECT SHOULD HAVE?

KC: Curiosity.

LB: The ability to step back to see the big picture and also zoom into the details. You need to understand things at various scales to be a truly great architect. It's a difficult skill.

SV: Empathy. As we progress in this profession, that becomes increasingly important. Our team members model and emphasize this quality—trying to empathize with end users' diverse lived experiences shapes our approach to design.

DO YOU HAVE A LEADER THAT YOU LOOK UP TO?

LB: I look up to Sarah and Kate.

KC: Same answer! These two! I love watching them work. They're so skilled in ways different from me. It's always a pleasure to observe my partners excel at something—never jealousy, always cheering each other on.

LB: Yep, same.

SV: Teary eyed over here.

DO YOU HAVE ANY RESOURCES TO SHARE?

LB: The EntreArchitect Community was invaluable—I listened to the podcast during my two-hour commute to San Francisco. I almost miss that commute because I learned so much from that podcast. And it's grown from the podcast to a whole ecosystem of community and tools. I got all my initial resources for starting my practice there, including templates and advice, plus a supportive community. I highly recommend it to people who are considering this path.

KC: Harvard Business Review and their podcast are great. The books "Algorithms to Live By" and "The Alliance" have helped me significantly.

LB: Any Simon Sinek books are excellent.

SV: "Design for Good," which our firm is currently reading, opened my eyes to architecture's purpose beyond just constructing buildings—our environments shape us and it's our role as designers is to do good and help people. "Designing Your Life" provides a process for understanding what you care about, what you enjoy, and how to test different paths to determine your next career step.

KC: I strongly recommend the AIA's Women's Leadership Summit, which travels around the country. It completely rewired my brain—realizing that hundreds of women across the country shared the same struggles I thought I faced alone was transformative.

HOW DO YOU ACQUIRE CLIENTS, COMPARED TO TRADITIONAL METHODS?

KC: We each approach this differently. I've found success through advocacy, particularly in affordable housing. By participating in the pro-housing community—attending city council meetings to support good projects—I naturally meet nonprofit housing developers. It's networking that feels organic because it stems from genuine interest rather than calculated business development.

SV: My approach is twofold: First, do exceptional work that reflects our passion, and people will naturally want to continue working with us and provide positive references. Much of our business comes from repeat clients.

Second, identify organizations making the changes you want to support. Volunteer with them, donate to them, understand their mission, and explore how architectural or community engagement solutions might advance their work.

LB: I'm a little bit more removed from our clients and put more focus on the practice. A strength I bring is authentically communicating who we are and how we practice - how that's different. We've been called a "feminist practice," and sharing that resonates with clients who align with our values. They're excited to work with architects who practice differently. I just love being able to focus on that vision and support a team that creates that environment.

I also maintain connections with other architects through AIA involvement. Forming partnerships with other firms—serving as an extended team or collaborating on projects—creates referral opportunities when they encounter work outside their specialization.

KC: We've made a conscious decision to be deeply and radically collaborative rather than viewing other firms as competitors. We share knowledge and influence, partnering with other architects both as engagement consultants and as extended team members. This is how FORA began when Leah's team worked with Sarah. We view other architects as partners in addressing the housing crisis with shared goals.

If we're too insecure to share knowledge with another firm for fear of losing clients, we're doomed. Unlearning this adversarial relationship with other architects has been rewarding.

LB: It's so much more fun when everyone is friends and supporting each other. When you're open and collaborative, others reciprocate. We recently received an incredible resource from another firm, and we give back equally. This exchange helps us all better serve our clients who are making positive changes in the world.

That's why we're vocal about being female firm owners – we want others to see themselves in us and know there are alternatives to being "someone's good little soldier."

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU WANT TO GIVE FUTURE LEADERS?

KC: See yourself as a future leader even if that opportunity hasn't been presented to you. We need everyone.

SV: What we're doing with FORA is allowing people to lead in their own way. We need diverse leaders who care about different things and approach challenges differently. Find your niche, identify what matters to you, how you prefer to work, and lean into it. Establish your footing in leadership.

LB: You won't be happy or succeed trying to lead like someone else. I struggled with this and it's the biggest topic I tackled with my coach. I didn't identify with the aggressive businessmen typically seen at the top of companies. That doesn't mean my type of leadership isn't valid; it's just different. Embracing your authentic self and understanding your unique approach will make you happiest and most successful. Be yourself, follow your path, and don't be afraid to do things your way.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

SV: Having the right partners and deeply caring about what you're doing and who you're serving.

KC: This industry is challenging, and it becomes much harder when you don't care about your projects or when they contradict your values. The work is only worthwhile when you're doing something meaningful. Finding that alignment might require some exploration beyond your first position, and that's okay.

LB: Do everything possible to create your own luck. I believe you can position yourself for opportunity through introspective work to understand what you want to be doing. Who you want to be. Where you want to be. By following your truth, things naturally fall into place. I've felt very lucky, and I attribute that to taking time to develop self-awareness and recognize opportunities when they arise.

KC: Be pushy and be bossy.

LB: Be freaking bossy.

KC: They'll criticize you regardless, so do it your way.



TIMELINE

- 2004**
Sarah, Leah, and Kate begin studying at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo
- 2009-2015**
Sarah and Kate work together at CAW Architects after graduation
- 2014-2017**
Leah is a Project Manager at WMAA William Maston Architect & Associates
- 2015-2018**
Kate is an Associate at Foster + Partners
- 2018**
Leah is a Project Architect at Perkins + Will
- 2018-2021**
Kate is a Project Architect at LPA
- 2018**
Leah founds her innovative all-remote architectural practice, EVIA Studio
- 2019**
Sarah is a Project Architect at OJK, Office of Jerome King
- 2020**
Leah's practice, EVIA studio, partners with Sarah at OJK to work on Solaire Apartments together
- 2020**
Sarah brings Leah and Kate into partnership negotiations for ownership of OJK
- 2021**
Sarah, Leah, and Kate finalize purchase of OJK EVIA and OJK teams merge
- 2022**
The team rebrands OJK to Architects FORA