

The logo consists of the letters 'KDG' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'K' and 'D' are white, while the 'G' is a vibrant blue. The letters are closely spaced, with the 'G' overlapping the 'D'.

KDG

DAN KEISER



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Founder and Principal Architect

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A Trail Worth Blazing

Dan Keiser has always had the mindset of a trailblazer. This has been evidenced throughout his life, from attending college as a first generation student, to starting and coaching a women’s golf team at his daughter’s Christian school, to selecting a career in architecture to begin with — he doesn’t shy away from the new, the challenging, and the unexpected. And building his full-service architecture company, [Keiser Design Group](#), from the ground up was a journey second to none.

What started as a hypothetical company name coined for a college project, KDG found its origins in the basement of the Keiser family home in 1995. Nearly 30 years later, the company now employs eight full-time architects and provides designs for [residential](#), [commercial](#), [mission-minded](#), and [school](#) builds.

While the company has moved to its own space, grown in size, and expanded its services, what has not changed is Keiser’s commitment to three core values: relationships, expertise, and integrity.

Discovering a Passion

At age ten, Keiser was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. With no hesitation, he replied, “An architect.” While Keiser was proximate to the design and construction industry through his father’s carpentry business, his foundational understanding of architecture was slim. Even still, he was captivated by the prospect of having his own firm one day.

“I had relatives who worked in manufacturing, and I saw a disparity between making your future happen and showing up and stamping out pieces all day,” said Keiser. “That was not intriguing to me at all.”

Throughout his teenage years, Keiser spent several summers working with his dad. He came to love the building industry and the environment, but he could not come to terms with the idea of working on a roof in 100-degree weather or building foundations in the winter. Through his work with his father, and the influence of playing with LEGOs throughout his childhood, Keiser’s path to architecture was solidified.

Before college, he had the chance to shadow at an architectural firm. He spent a few hours observing the office, and the scale models being built out of chipboard and cardboard immediately caught his attention.

“I remember as a kid thinking, ‘Woah, this is kind of cool,’” said Keiser. “I went home and grabbed as much cardboard as I could find and began building a model of my home. That brief encounter in a real office was inspiring.”

Keiser is quick to admit that he went into college at the University of Cincinnati “blindly.” As a first-generation student, he had no one preparing him in high school for how his GPA might impact him down the line. No one guiding him through the university vernacular. Once again — he was blazing a trail.

“I had a bit of a bumpy ride through college,” said Keiser. “I metaphorically grabbed the machete and began blazing the trail without really knowing what was required. It took me seven years to get a five-year degree.”

After being rejected from the architecture program at UC, he transferred to Kent State University where he obtained his bachelor of architecture. After seven challenging years, Keiser was ready to get to work in the field.

Gaining Experience

Keiser graduated in 1993, which was a year of economic downturn. While Keiser originally intended to return to his hometown of Mansfield, Ohio, his wife, Renee had landed a job in Columbus. So Keiser began interviewing and sending out resumes to companies in the greater Columbus area.

He landed his first job with a team of three people. Working on a small team allowed Keiser to sit next to the owner and see “under the hood” of running an architecture firm. “I remember my boss went on vacation when I was just two months into the job,” said Keiser. “He threw some of his responsibilities at me right away, and it was before the time of cell phones, so there was no safety net. Looking back, that was such a cool experience to be trusted with real projects right out of college.”

After a year there, Keiser moved on to a slightly larger firm, Schwab Architects, which had eight employees at the time. His time there exposed him to a variety of project types, from commercial projects to higher education architecture.

At this time, Keiser began to receive phone calls from people from his hometown requesting his architectural services. He began taking personal ownership of his projects and gained experience as an independent architect, while still working full-time with Schwab.

Two years later, he transitioned to working for Sullivan Bruck Architects, a firm with 25 people, where he worked on multi-family residences and churches.

“Within those three companies, I got experience with everything from a really small firm to a medium-sized firm,” said Keiser. “It was a good, diverse experience for me, where I got to meet a lot of amazing people, but I started to develop an itch to build my own team.” Keiser continued to manage around 10 personal projects per year at KDG, while working full-time at Sullivan Bruck. But flying under the radar and managing both became difficult to manage — until he stumbled upon an ad in the local newspaper.

Investing in Youth

Keiser, who was not a regular newspaper reader, says it was an oddity that he happened to see the ad listing the opportunity to teach an [architecture and construction management program](#) for Gahanna Lincoln High School in 1999.

“While I never saw myself as a teacher, I was always student-centric,” said Keiser. “At my first three jobs, whenever I heard about career days at high schools, my hand was in the air to go and share about the field. Plus, I was intrigued by the opportunity to build my business on the side. There was really good alignment between my dreams and pursuits and what they had to offer.”

Keiser served as an instructor at Gahanna through [Eastland-Fairfield Career and Technical School](#) for the next nine years, teaching students from 17 different schools.

“It was this unique melting pot experience students got to have before college,” said Keiser. “On Fridays, we would have several different high school football jerseys in the room, and I would joke with the students about whose team would win the game that night. It was really neat.”

The two-year program brought students into the classroom for two periods every day, which meant Keiser had ample time with the students. Plus, he was able to make the program highly interactive, taking field trips and working on hands-on projects.

“College is an expensive experiment,” said Keiser. “For students considering architecture in college, we decreased their odds of dropping out by providing information, observation, and exposure.”

And when it's time for students to find a job after college, Gahanna's architecture program graduates have access to a network of hundreds of alumni to contact across the nation and abroad.

Throughout his nine years at Gahanna High School, Keiser was able to ramp up his projects with KDG and build his business — a business centered on relationships, expertise, and integrity.

Building a Team

According to Keiser, the company's core values weren't defined until year 24 of the business, but that didn't look like gathering employees around a white board. They were tested by trial.

"Our core values happened over time organically," said Keiser. "When you grow a business from the ground up, you start meeting people, and those people refer other people, and it's relationship-driven."

The value of expertise comes from architects needing to know a little about a lot. They must be generalists in many ways.

"We need to know how to design, how to present, and how things are built," said Keiser. "Every project is a triangle between a client, an architect, and a builder. You have to be honest and vulnerable to make the project a success."

And according to Keiser, it's all dependent on the truth, or integrity.

These values don't just drive the client experience at KDG, they're imperative to the culture for his employees. He strives to create a family-first culture by providing a flexible schedule for his team.

"Nothing happening in the office is more important than what is happening at home," said Keiser. "With a dozen employees, I see that I have a responsibility to a dozen families. It's a little daunting, but it's still such a great opportunity to be a part of."

At the end of the day, it's seeing his team succeed that brings Keiser the most joy.

Whether it's giving a high schooler an opportunity he never had by giving them a taste of what it's like to be an architect or allowing a college student to take the lead on a project for their internship — Dan finds joy in watching individuals growing professionally and personally.

So much so, Keiser remains connected with the architecture and construction management program for Gahanna, now sitting on the advisory committee. He sits alongside several of his staff at KDG who share the same passion for mentoring the next generation.

"As I've gotten older I've gotten wiser, I have learned that not every potential project is the right project, and not every potential staff person is the right person. Alignment is key," said Keiser.

And alignment has proven beneficial so far. Going into its 30th year of business, KDG now has a strong team around Keiser, so that he doesn't have to be as involved in the day-to-day production. Instead, he can focus on casting vision for the next five years of the company, where his main objective is not getting bigger, but getting better.

"If we get better, we'll most likely get bigger, but we must get in the weeds and establish good systems first," said Keiser. "We've moved this thing down the rails a lot, and it's pretty exciting to look ahead and think about where it could go next."

Keiser still pinches himself when he stops and reflects on the journey that led him to this place. The trailblazer's dream has become a reality.

But like any trailblazer knows, there's always more ground to explore.

[Learn more about KDG. »](#)



designed for you

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