

IN PERSON

Digging Deep for Green Design Solutions

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Kristen Fritsch

Sustainability coordinator, Elkus Manfredi Architects

Age: 50

Industry experience: 21 years

Long-established rules of development are being rewritten as developers and communities confront the looming threat of climate change. As sustainability coordinator for Elkus Manfredi Architects, Kristen Fritsch advises clients on how to keep current on the latest regulations and strategies for making buildings energy-efficient and resistant to extreme weather events. She joined the firm in 2012 and advises developers on resiliency, sustainability and designing healthy housing and workplace options.

Q: How did the path of your career in architecture lead to a sustainability focus?

A: I went to a small high school in Nebraska and our guidance counselor was a priest. I didn't have a clue

what architecture was but was interested in science, physics and art, and he put it together that I should take a look at architecture. The University of Nebraska had a week-long program for high school students to explore the career and that was the key for me understanding what it was, and I was sold. In terms of sustainability, that came from my Depression-era grandparents who were constantly urging us not to be wasteful of food and resources.

My first job at a firm in Seattle named Boxwood was a key in the early 2000s, when cities started requiring LEED projects, and we were all trying to figure out how to do it. Those early years and those projects where we had to do integrated design with our whole project team – landscape architect, MEP contractor – we were all working together to figure it out. Not necessarily because of code requirements, but because it really made sense. That stuck with me, and I started to shift to being less on architecture and more focused on sustainability.

Q: What brought you to Boston?

A: The recession. My husband is an architect, and Seattle was hit pretty hard as Washington Mutual was one of the first to go in the banking scandal. I was a principal at the firm and a lot of our work was with wineries, and banks stopped lending. NBBJ, where my husband was working, took over a Boston office and offered to move us and we thought: Why not? It was a big move, but it was fun. We arrived on New Year's Eve 2010, and we live in Arlington.

Q: Who is a mentor or industry figure who influenced your career?

A: Definitely Joe Chauncey at Boxwood. He was and is the principal owner, and he invested in his staff. We were given the space to develop our interests. We were able to do research and take the extra step to educate clients on trying a green roof, for example. A lot of this was before software was available, so we were building physical models and having a lab run tests on them. He gave us the space to really dig into that as a firm. We were always asking what we could do better. He would make sure we go through the process with every client and spend a few hours asking the right questions and aligning the goals, so it was a more efficient process going forward. That was one of the main things I brought to Elkus Manfredi: how important it was to have these client conversations to build consensus.

Q: As cities such as Boston review regulations on embedded carbon, how will that influence the choice of materials in projects?

A: We just had a meeting on this yesterday. We've been focusing on operational energy for a long time and we've gotten really good at that. The embodied carbon products cost more, and there's no real incentive to choose the higher-cost products. This is going to be huge for us, because it'll force us to sit down and make sure we're doing what we can in our projects to reduce carbon, whether it's improving the structural system or concrete mix or selecting materials. We will have that goal holding us to that, requiring us to choose the lower embodied carbon option.

Q: Will that tip the scales toward more adaptive reuse projects?

A: I hope so. We designed the Little Building [an Emerson College residence hall] and 401 Park, which were great uses of structures and creating almost brand-new buildings from 100-year-old structures. It certainly adds another layer of design to the project. From a design and sustainability end, we are working hard to push that concept of adaptive reuse and reuse of materials in general.

Q: What are some of the new sustainability requirements locally that developers have to be aware of?

A: We're doing a lot of work in Newton and they have a really strong committee that reviews your project for Passive House standards for multifamily housing. It's exciting to see that in the smaller communities. There was an executive order from the White House [issued Dec. 8] for federal buildings to become carbon-neutral by 2045, and that one is exciting and hopefully will be a model.

Q: How are the different wellness building standards like WELL and Fitwel changing designs and what are the differences in their goals?

A: Before COVID, we were doing a lot of what I call the basics: daylight, air and comfort. Not too drafty, not too loud. Your people can go to work and not have these distractions. When COVID hit, those projects were really ready, providing air quality and flexible spaces for workspaces to shift if they needed to be further apart. On WELL versus Fitwel, WELL is focused more on the culture of the organization – features that encourage a deeper commitment to wellness through human resources – whereas Fitwell is focused more on the physical design elements, sort of a light version of LEED.

Fritsch's Five Favorite Nature Sites

1. Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area
2. Skyline Loop Trail at Mt. Rainier, Washington
3. The Sand Hills near Valentine, Nebraska
4. Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah
5. Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

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