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KCC

ARCHITECTURE



Karla Castellanos spent a decade clearing the hurdles between a Mexican architecture degree and Canadian registration, then hit a ceiling no credential could fix. Eleven years after founding KCC Architecture, her White Rock practice has completed more than twenty buildings, built a specialization in tilt-up concrete, and reached the point where new clients arrive by knocking on the door.



Karla Castellanos immigrated to Vancouver from Guadalajara, Mexico, in 2002. It took her the better part of a decade to earn her registration with the Architectural Institute of British Columbia, granted in 2011, a path that ran through residency, citizenship, and the accumulation of Canadian professional experience. What she found on the other side of that milestone was a different kind of barrier. Established firms gave her drawings to produce, teams to manage, and clients to meet, but the opportunity to design an entire building, to express the art of the form, was never offered.

She founded KCC Architecture in 2015 expecting a modest practice. "Quite frankly, I thought at the beginning it's going to be me for a couple of years," she says, a chance to pursue the buildings she wanted to work on. The response exceeded the plan. Eleven years in, KCC has completed more than twenty buildings, earning an Award of Merit at a Vancouver Island commercial building awards program in 2022 with a second project shortlisted, and remains a deliberately boutique firm with a strict internal process governing how drawings are produced, information is managed, and design intent is carried into construction.

Castellanos frames the decision to go out on her own in terms that have little to do with technical readiness. "It's not so much about how you deliver the information, but whether or not you have a voice to deliver," she says. "Not so much how you say it, but do you have something to say."

THE YEARS IN ESTABLISHED PRACTICE

Before founding KCC, Castellanos worked across several established practices in the Vancouver market, firms with distinctly different approaches to the profession and different goals. She describes taking the best of each and integrating it into her own formula. But the lesson she draws from those years is about disposition rather than technique: starting a practice, in her telling, is less about how much an architect knows than about how much risk they are willing to take, and how sure they are of their own voice as a designer.

CHOOSING CLIENTS, QUALIFYING CONTRACTORS

KCC's projects typically run three to five years from first meeting to completion, and Castellanos treats that duration as the defining fact of how the firm takes on work. The relationship with the client, built on trust, transparency, and honesty, governs which projects the firm accepts. In the early years of the practice, that was the whole filter. It no longer is.

As the firm matured, Castellanos developed a qualification process for the contractors she works with, born of experience watching design intent evaporate during construction. A building executed by a contractor with no interest in understanding its architectural components can be completed on time and on budget and still emerge, in her words, as "completely another expression of what I was originally intending."

The firm now identifies a project's key architectural expressions early and budgets for them specifically, so that quality is planned rather than hoped for. "It's the first day a client comes in trying to get a project done, and the last day, how you shake their hand," she says. "Walking away from somebody that is happy or is unhappy."

THE TILT-UP SPECIALIZATION

For roughly eight years, tilt-up concrete construction has been a defining focus of the practice, and for Castellanos the attachment predates the firm. Her relationship with concrete goes back to Mexico, where she came to regard it as a beautiful, versatile, and durable material, as structure and as expression at once. Tilt-up gives her a way to keep exploring it.

The method's natural territory is the industrial building, and KCC has built a client base among contractors and private owners developing facilities that combine warehouse and processing space with office headquarters, and sometimes a retail component within the same development. Castellanos finds the combination genuinely interesting rather than merely commercial, and she is direct that the method's potential remains largely untapped.

"We haven't even begun to explore how we can use it," she says. The firm is currently designing a community centre in tilt-up, an application well outside the method's industrial comfort zone, and a member of the Tilt-Up Concrete Association, KCC is registered with both the AIBC and the Alberta Association of Architects.

AN EXPANDING PORTFOLIO

As client trust has compounded, the work has grown more ambitious. KCC currently has three office building projects in development at six and seven storeys, one in concrete and one in steel, each demanding a different structural and design expression. Castellanos describes her clients as having become more sophisticated over the firm's lifetime, and the portfolio has followed.

Operating across British Columbia and Alberta has proven less complicated than the dual registration might suggest. All design and correspondence runs from the firm's base office in White Rock, with satellite personnel in Alberta performing field reviews.

Calgary, as Castellanos points out, is a flight of little more than an hour. The practice of the profession differs somewhat between provinces, and the contractors differ too, but the firm's performance and values carry through unchanged.





KCC INTERIOR DESIGN

The firm's newest expansion is KCC Interior Design, launching this year, and its motivation is architectural rather than commercial. On a recent completed project whose building design landed with significant impact, the client engaged a separate interior designer, and Castellanos watched the building's concept and language stop at the front door. The new division exists so that does not happen again.

"My aspiration is to be able to design a building outside in," she says, carrying the concept, intent, and language of the exterior through every interior space. She regards it as taking the firm's design capability to its next level.



TECHNOLOGY WITH INTENT

KCC runs its practice on Vectorworks and Apple hardware, and in recent years has directed significant resources toward full photorealistic rendering and building walkthroughs. The capability serves clients, municipalities, and approval processes alike, but Castellanos holds it to an unusual standard: her renderings are meant to match the finished building, not flatter it.

"A rendering is representing how the building is actually going to look," she says, and she takes visible pride in placing her renderings beside completion photographs and finding them identical. On artificial intelligence, her position is measured. The firm uses AI for writing, fee proposals, certain rendering tools, and marketing portfolios, useful improvements at the margins, in her description. For drafting and design itself, she has not found it ready. "Technology has to be used with intelligence and intent," she says. "It has to serve the purpose."

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE DESIGN

Castellanos holds a LEED AP designation, but no KCC building has pursued formal certification; her clients have shown little appetite for the documentation the process demands. Her conviction sits elsewhere, in sustainability embedded in the design itself, an approach she absorbed in Mexico, where environmental design was never taught as a separate discipline from architecture.

In practice, that means every KCC building is designed around where the sun rises and sets, where the strongest winds run, and how air moves through the structure naturally, rather than compensating with larger mechanical systems. She connects the discipline directly to a changing climate and the need for buildings durable enough to meet it. "We have underestimated this for many years," she says, "and in some ways we're paying the consequences."



ON SITE WITH THE TRADES

Castellanos's architecture education in Mexico did not separate design from construction. Her training included the practical work of building, millwork, concrete, electrical fundamentals, and it left her with a durable admiration for the trades and a working understanding of what contractors and subcontractors actually face on site.

That understanding shapes how KCC conducts its field reviews. Castellanos describes the firm's best projects as the ones where site visits become collaborative design sessions, two or three people gathered around a corner detail, developing it into something better than she would have drawn alone. "We are outsiders of construction," she acknowledges; the synergy depends on how welcoming a contractor is to architects. But where it takes hold, the results are the buildings she is proudest of. "Everyone's hands are on the vision," she says. "We all work truly together to accomplish something which is majestic."





THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Castellanos intends to grow KCC, in team and in the ambition of its projects, but she resists the industry's habit of defining a firm by its specialization. Her framing returns the profession to first principles. "An architect is not somebody that is specialized in one single sector," she says. "An architect is somebody that can take a problem and solve the problem."

Higher-density redevelopment, a first community centre, new building types: each arrives at the firm as a problem to be solved with the same team of consultants and the same disciplines.

The most telling signal of where the firm stands may be how its newest clients arrive. Word of mouth carried KCC for a decade. In the past few years, something else has started happening: people encounter a completed KCC building, ask who the architect was, and knock on the door in White Rock. "They come because they saw one of my projects and they loved it," Castellanos says. "That for me is the ultimate accomplishment." For a practice built on the conviction that quality manifests in the building and returns to its maker, it is difficult to imagine a more fitting proof.



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ARCHITECTURE

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