

Keith Stachowiak

Founder, KSK Architects LLC
Rotary Member Since 2018

“I promise I’m not weird,” said Milwaukee architect Keith Stachowiak as he showed off his 1929 funeral parlor turned office and home. Like the historic Schramka Funeral Home where he now works and lives, Stachowiak believes every building (old, or new) has a story to tell.

To Keith, when a historic place is restored and adapted, when what is inaccessible to some is made accessible to all, or a new asset is added to the community, it’s not just about bricks and mortar; it’s about connecting people to their city’s living history.

That philosophy guided him to establish KSK Architects LLC in January 2025. The firm’s mission is to breathe new life into aging structures, combining modern functionality with timeless design. For Keith, architecture is equal parts craft, service, and storytelling.

A lifelong Milwaukeean, Keith’s childhood was grounded by parents who emphasized empathy and civic duty. “They taught me early that life isn’t just about yourself,” he recalled. “You give back. You help your community.”

Some of his earliest memories are tied to the city and his upbringing, like the day in 1994 when President Bill Clinton stopped for custard at Leon’s Frozen Custard. His grade school, Our Lady Queen of Peace, was within the security perimeter. “They canceled class and took us all on a walk for ice cream with the President,” he said, laughing. “That’s one of those core memories you never forget.”

After graduating from Marquette University High School, Keith studied architecture at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Two experiences in his teens sealed the deal and set him on his path: reading historian John Gurda’s *The Making of Milwaukee* and taking a high-school elective in architectural history. “I got hooked on local history and design at the same time,” he said.



When he completed grad school in 2008, the height of the Great Recession, the construction industry was at a standstill. “It was the worst time in half a Century or more to graduate with a degree in architecture,” said Keith. “More than seventy-five percent of my classmates were forced to pursue other careers, mostly in adjacent fields.”

But Keith had already landed an internship with Uihlein Wilson Architects. The firm kept its staff during the downturn, and as a direct result, Keith gained great experience and earned his license early in his career.

Over the next decade and a half, he gained experience at several well-known firms, including Workshop Architects, SmithGroup, and HGA. The projects he worked on were large, complex, and rewarding - but he realized he could be even more impactful on a smaller scale.

On the side, he began working on small residential designs and adaptive-reuse projects. That side work fueled his love of design, problem-solving, and direct collaboration with clients. “The cycle of gratification in architecture is so long,” he said. “Large projects can take years in development, but you can see a small project built within months.”

Today, much of KSK Architects’ work focuses on nonprofit and community organizations. One early highlight: an accessibility renovation for Bay View’s Cactus Club, where the goal was universal access, one front door for everyone. The project became a community effort that drew national attention, capped by a surprise \$30,000 donation from musician Jack White. “It showed how design can galvanize people,” Keith said.

Other current projects include a welcome center for the Conservancy for Healing and Heritage in Franklin, and restoration work on other local historic commercial buildings.



His love for nonprofits and community work stems from a rich upbringing of volunteerism. As a teenager, Keith spent summers volunteering for local community organizations, including a summer at the Penfield Children’s Center, a formative experience in his young life. After college, he trained as a tour guide for Historic Milwaukee, leading walking tours of Brady Street and developing a riverboat history cruise on the Milwaukee River, which ran for several seasons.

He also co-founded the local chapter of DOCOMOMO-WI (Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement), a preservation group that champions mid-century and modernist buildings, structures he believes are tomorrow’s landmarks.

“People think ‘preservation’ is only about cream-city brick and Victorian era architecture,” he said. “Milwaukee is also blessed with some remarkable work from the 50s-70s. The War Memorial Center and the Mitchell Park Domes are world-class modernist works, and there are countless smaller examples from this era. We need to recognize their value now, before it’s too late.”



Today, Keith and his wife, Elisa, are raising two young daughters, Gwendolyn “Winnie” and newborn Matilda “Tilda.”

Their home is filled with Milwaukee memorabilia and vintage Milwaukee keepsakes. Among his favorite : a collection of vintage embalming tools (not weird), chairs from iconic Milwaukee buildings, and an extensive collection of weekly Milwaukee transit passes dating back to the 1930s. When he’s not dealing with the many challenges of running a new, small architectural practice, Keith has begun exploring another new and unexpected interest: searching for Sodalite, also known as “Yooperlites.” He spends nights scanning the shoreline with a UV flashlight, collecting the fluorescent stones.

A Rotary Club of Milwaukee member since 2018, he values the exposure to diverse ideas and community leaders. “It’s easy to get siloed into your profession,” he said. “Rotary keeps me connected to what’s really happening in the city.”

He rarely sits at the same table twice, preferring to meet new people each week. “That’s how unexpected collaborations start.”

Editor’s Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Elizabeth Hummitzsch.