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bKL Architecture Announced as AIA Chicago 2020 Firm of the Year

Chicago, Illinois - December 9, 2020 - On Tuesday, December 1, 2020, AIA Chicago announced that bKL Architecture has been selected as the recipient of the 2020 Firm of the Year Award. The AIA Chicago Firm of the Year Award, now in its 29th year, recognizes achievements and excellence in the body of work produced by a firm over a period of time, and the ongoing contributions of a firm to the advancement of the architectural profession.

Founding Principal, Tom Kerwin, FAIA, responds to news of the award: “We are incredibly honored by our selection as the AIA Chicago Firm of the Year. I am very proud of the body of work designed and built in our very first ten years, and equally proud of the powerful team and community we’ve built within the firm. We are excited to begin the next decade of excellent, impactful design.”

Founded by Kerwin in 2010, bKL now numbers more than 80 passionate designers and practitioners with expertise in a variety of markets and project types. In an exciting development this year, Kerwin has been joined by Danielle Tillman, AIA, as Managing Principal, and Jon Gately, and Juan Robles, AIA, as Principals. Even through the significant challenges of the past decade—from recessions to pandemics—bKL has been marked by its ability to adapt, grow and thrive.

This year’s jury, composed of past recipients and professionals in the field, were particularly impressed with the firm’s body of work. “The firm has produced an incredible portfolio in just 10 years,” commented one juror, highlighting that their range of projects demonstrated a “commitment to design and to the community.” They were also impressed by bKL’s strong dedication to equity and the well-being of its staff: “The firm has a commitment to creating a diverse environment. They are putting words into action by diversifying firm leadership,” commented one juror.

Managing Principal, Danielle Tillman, says these design and community initiatives further exemplify bKL’s bright future: “At bKL, our mantra is to ‘build.’ This is our everyday objective in our pursuit of excellence. Jon Gately, Juan Robles and I are proud to work alongside Tom, and to be part of a team that is ceaselessly looking to hone their craft for the benefit of communities and their built environments.”

Throughout its first decade, bKL has been given the opportunity—and responsibility—to complete work on some of Chicago’s most prestigious sites. Its first large project “Coast” was a commission for a new 47-story luxury apartment building on the prominent northern edge of Lakeshore East, which received acclaim for its sleek form and exterior of varied glass elements meeting functional needs with subtle visual interest. Following Coast was Wolf Point West, one of the highest-profile sites in the city. Designing Wolf Point West was a difficult assignment on many levels, not least because the irregular shoreline was part of the city’s evolving Riverwalk and would defy a simple, rectangular footprint. A clean and uncomplicated profile manifested in a simple massing of three vertical slabs, with a footprint that could trace the site’s irregular shoreline while creating a multiplicity of corner spaces and views. The success of Wolf Point West proved to the developers and to bKL itself that difficult design problems often lead to the most creative solutions. Later came other prestigious projects: MILA and 300 N. Michigan, two prominent sites on Michigan Ave; a collaboration with Studio Gang on one of the nation’s tallest mixed-use towers, 101-story The St. Regis Chicago; crowning achievement of the Lakeshore East Development, Cirrus and



Cascade Towers; and an increase of work outside Chicago, including recently completed Gio Midtown in Miami, 5th & Brazos in Austin under construction, and an ever-growing presence in China's booming development scene.

The team has also had the opportunity to bring its designs to some of Chicago's historically overlooked neighborhoods and communities. The Whitney Young Branch of the Chicago Public Library in the South Side neighborhood of Chatham was such a project. After bKL received the commission from the city, the firm began an intense series of meetings with both librarians and community members. The result, delivered in little more than a year, is a handsome building, renewed for a range of functions that only begin with reading and checking out books. Another ongoing project is the Julia C. Lathrop Homes, a low-rise Chicago Housing Authority property originally built in 1938 and designed in that period by a roster of important architects, including Hugh Garden and Jens Jensen. In 2011, Lathrop became part of CHA's Plan for Transformation, a program to improve the lives of public housing residents by eliminating high-density buildings from the urban renewal era and creating mixed-income communities, for which Lathrop would be particularly well-suited. As bKL was among several selected for the restoration of old buildings and the construction of new ones, the firm embarked on the long and collaborative process of redeveloping the 34-acre site. And in March, 2020, bKL's entrepreneurial spirit again prompted a shift as the COVID-19 crisis altered daily life all across the globe. This time, bKL leveraged its innovative tendencies for a new client—healthcare workers. The bKL Face Shield Initiative put the company's 3D printers to work printing critically-needed face shields, eventually delivering more than 5,000 face shields to hospitals in need.

Just as the AIA Chicago Firm of the Year award recognizes design and project excellence at bKL, it is also a conferral of bKL's commitment to its team. bKL's passion for its employees is central to the firm's culture and success. Opening during a downturn in the economic climate proved a blessing for bKL, allowing the firm to make influential acquisition decisions. Key hires helped determine hiring practices that have established bKL as a diverse and culturally rich firm. bKL's current staff of more than 80 includes over 50% women and over 30% minorities. The team is also comprised of employees from 17 countries speaking 16 different languages. This diversity is a result of the intentional hiring practices implemented by Kerwin at the inception of bKL, and it is the belief of bKL that diversity is the foundation for great design.

It is the firm's attentiveness to their staff's development, community needs, and diversity—alongside their commitment to design excellence—that propelled bKL Architecture to the forefront in the Chicago architecture community. You can celebrate their award at AIA Chicago's Annual Meeting & Professional Excellence Awards event on December 15, 4:00-5:00 PM online. Information can be found at aiachicago.org.

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About bKL Architecture: *Based in Chicago, bKL Architecture was founded in 2010 by Thomas Kerwin, FAIA. With offices in Chicago, Washington DC and Shanghai, its portfolio includes globally recognized projects that span a broad range of scales and building typologies. The firm is led by a senior team with decades of international experience, and has a staff of remarkable diversity. Tenets of bKL include service to its clients, leading-edge design and a deep civic commitment to the communities where the firm designs and builds.*