



The **Shaper** of Things

If you're wondering what Boston will look and feel like in 10 years – the shape of our skyline, the boldness of our buildings, the run of our streets – you need to know **Kairos Shen**. By Kris Frieswick



ALL EYES FORWARD
Kairos Shen outside the
Ferdinand Building in
Roxbury's Dudley Square.

to Come

The architect unfurled his thick stack of drawings and designs on the table in Kairos Shen's office. Five minutes after seeing the preliminary and confidential ideas for a new public building, Shen, the director of planning for the Boston Redevelopment Authority who was recently tapped as the city's chief planner, grabbed a red felt-tip pen and began drawing his revised version of the building on one of the now-irrelevant plans the architect had arrived with.

As he visualized the new concept forming in his head, Shen's eyes wandered off to a corner of his office ceiling, a jumble of exposed pipes and stark, angular concrete joists and structural supports, elements of City Hall's Brutalist architecture. His gaze traveled out the windows down to the city below, which from this ninth-floor perch looks like an architect's scale model of Boston's waterfront and harbor. When his eyes snapped back to the plan, he started sketching furiously. Once finished, his new diagram eviscerated

the architect's design while leaving the most basic elements of the building shape intact. Shen ended the meeting by informing the architect that he believed it had been a very positive step in the right direction and that the architect should report to his client that they are on the right track because they had retained the basic massing of the building – sort of. “When you come back, please bring two different versions of the ideas that we discussed,” meaning, of course, his red diagrams. The architect agreed the meeting had been positive and seemed to really believe it, even though he left carrying only one of the pages he'd brought in – the one with Shen's drawings on it, not his own.

Kairos Shen, who is 43 and was to be married this past Friday, is a youthful wisp of a man whose soft voice reveals both his Chinese ancestry and a slight English twang, a remnant from his upbringing in Hong Kong. The accent, his gracious manner, and his clarity of vision gives him the uncanny ability to say no while still making you feel as if he said yes. He has had lots of opportunities to ply this skill. He's been director of planning at the BRA since 2002, quietly overseeing and often reshaping the look, feel, height, size, and location of some of the biggest projects ever built in the city. In a world where developers, architects, community activists, and politicians almost never agree on details, Shen has managed to earn a reputation as an intelligent, thoughtful, creative visionary with a knack for crafting compromise where once dwelled only conflict, animosity, and great gnashing of teeth.

In January, his potential to shape the city was dramatically expanded when he was named to the position of chief planner for the city of Boston. That means his job now encompasses more than just responding to existing building proposals – the scope of his work at the BRA. Suddenly, he has been charged with creating a future vision for our city and has been given the authority to use and coordinate all the planning activities conducted by its various agencies, along with state and other governmental bodies. Shen in some ways is the city's “lead visionary,” and as far as some are concerned, he's the only guy for the job.

“He's paid his dues,” says John Palmieri, director of the BRA, who, with Mayor Tom Menino, launched plans in November to resurrect the chief city planner position, but only because they could put Shen in it. “If he were a new planner with the skill set he currently has, we probably wouldn't do this chief planner position. This position has to do with it being the right time with the right person, and that's Kairos.”

Shen is low-key and unfailingly pleasant (before agreeing to this story, he fretted about it being perceived as him seeking out attention). You would never know in speaking to him that, in the words of the notoriously heavy-handed Menino, he has been a key force in “reshaping the city of Boston.” His fingerprints are on almost every project that's been built in the city since he started with the BRA in 1993 – the same year Menino took office. Shen's first job was determining the scope, location, and legislation required to make a go of a new convention center. He worked on the plans for the new South Boston waterfront development and met extensively with South Boston activists to get community buy-in. He worked with the old Red Sox owners when they were considering moving Fenway Park, and he spearheaded that neighborhood's new zoning. His fingerprints have gotten deeper and more visible as his tenure and seniority have lengthened.

It is conventional wisdom that Menino wields the power over which projects get built, how they get built, and which get, well, not “rejected” so much as endlessly tied up until they just fade away. Menino, however, credits Shen with guiding his thinking on these issues. “What do I know about architecture?” the mayor tells me, although he acknowledges it hasn't stopped him from lending design assistance on projects from time to time (we can thank him for the addition of that dome on top of 110 Huntington Avenue). “Kairos is a respected, outstanding planner and urban designer. He's been my go-to guy for many years. We began this journey together, and he's been a point person for me. I rely on him because I have total trust in his creativity and his judgment.” That, Menino adds, is why he named him chief planner,

Kris Frieswick is a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

giving him the responsibility for determining where the city is going, what it needs, where it needs it, and how it's going to get there.

The timing of Shen's appointment couldn't have been more fortuitous, and it lends his first name a prophetic quality: “Kairos” is a Greek word that translates loosely as “the right place at the right time.” Demographic shifts in the United States mean the country's two largest age groups, empty-nest baby boomers and “millennials” (20-to-30-somethings noted for their postponement of marriage and families) are moving back into cities after decades of moving out. The traditional single-family home currently makes up the majority of the available housing stock in the country at a time when fewer and fewer individuals and families are interested in living in one. Add in skyrocketing fuel prices, plus a new focus on green living and reducing carbon footprints, and it all means that downtown living has an attraction it hasn't had in decades. Finding places to put all those new city dwellers, keeping businesses here so the dwellers will have a place to work, locating amenities that make their neighborhoods livable, and creating an infrastructure that gets them safely and quickly around once they are here – these will be the challenges for anyone planning Boston's future. On top of that, the city is about to add, out of whole cloth, an entire new neighborhood on Fan Pier, an opportunity that water-locked Boston hasn't had since the Back Bay was landfilled in the 1890s.

“If there was anyone to be in charge of a skyline, I think Kairos is the right guy, and it's going to be hard to find anyone who thinks differently, because he's such a talent,” says developer Joe Fallon, CEO and president of The Fallon Co., responsible for, among other things, the new Westin Hotel near the Convention Center, and much of the Fan Pier development.

Shen is clearly ready for his new role. The question is whether Boston is ready for Shen.

The most notable aspect of Boston's architecture is that most of it is really old. And we like it that way. There are some standout contemporary designs locally, but most are in Cambridge, specifically at MIT – the Stata Center (by Frank Gehry), Simmons Hall (by Steven Holl), the Chapel (by Eero Saarinen), and the Wiesner Building, home of The List Visual Arts Center (by I.M. Pei). There is also the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard (by Le Corbusier). In Boston proper, City Hall (by Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles and built in 1968) was, for all its haters, a dramatic contemporary departure from the status quo. The Federal Reserve Bank, Harbor Towers, and the Christian Science Church were all groundbreaking in their time, but success in Boston architecture has long been gauged by its ability to blend in, not stand out. The new Institute of Contemporary Art (by Diller, Scofidio and Renfro) has been hailed by local and national critics as a breakthrough in the Boston design scene, but those accolades always recognize that a breakthrough building here would be considered just another contemporary building in another city. Shen is well aware that in the grand scheme of things, the ICA building isn't all that revolutionary by world architectural standards, and he acknowledges that Boston's architectural aesthetic is more measured, which he believes is one of its strengths.

“Most of the buildings that we build in Boston are like well-tailored suits, with an occasional fancy tie here and there,” says Shen, adding that continuing that design aesthetic is his goal. But he doesn't confuse this approach to planning – which has resulted in what he calls a beautiful palette of “background” buildings in the city – with doing groundbreaking architecture and design. Shen's favorite architects are Scandinavian modern humanists like Alvar Aalto (whose Baker Building at MIT was the subject of his master's thesis). He collects early Scandinavian modernist furniture, and he says that for all the local hubbub about the so-called bleeding-edge ICA building design, he thinks that it's “a very measured building,” especially compared with what could have gone there.

“Think about what the difference between what a Frank Gehry build-

“Most of the buildings that we build in Boston are like well-tailored suits, with an occasional fancy tie here and there,” says Shen, standing beside a model of the city at the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

ing would have been like as opposed to the ICA,” says Shen. “The ICA is really just a box.”

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Shen graduated from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania before attending MIT for his master’s in architecture. His parents, Chinese-born residents of the Philippines until World War II, both received advanced degrees in the United States before settling in the British colony. Shen credits his exposure to the architecture of Hong Kong for developing his eye for design, and the mixture of cultures in the city during his upbringing for his ability to communicate with all types of people. His approach to complex problems was shaped by his architecture training and by his father, a theology professor who encouraged his students and his two sons to never shy away from asking the obvious, if difficult, questions, even in a culture that did not necessarily prize open minds and radical concepts. Conversely, being raised in an Asian culture instilled the traditions of respect for elders, superiors, rules, and procedure. These factors have conspired to give Shen the needed tools to survive in the world of public service, especially in a place as parochial, hierarchical, and process-driven as Boston City Hall.

“It’s odd,” says Shen, “because I’m very respectful of protocol, but at the same time, I don’t find [it] confining. A lot of people, either they don’t have any respect for process and protocol, or they are completely bound by it. Growing up in Hong Kong where there was always the rules . . . and being in an environment where we were encouraged to question them but also respect the rules at the same time was a kind of dynamic that maybe still carries on in me.”

Shen wasn’t supposed to be a city planner. His aspirations were in architecture, which he practiced after graduating from MIT. But when the job at the BRA came up in 1993, he was intrigued by the complexity of the problems it entailed, and before he knew it, a decade had gone by and he was the BRA’s director of planning. Those problems are what hold him here still. That and a deep love for the city. He owns an apartment building in Chinatown and lives on the top floor. He owns another apartment building in Cambridge. He knows the trials of being a landlord and complains about water and sewer bills like any local. But Shen’s foreign upbringing and extensive world travels give him a perspective on the city, a clear view of what makes it unique, as well as a keen eye for what must be preserved in order for Boston to retain its Boston-ness. It is a perspective that many longtime residents have lost through time, proximity, and familiarity. Hearing Shen describe his adopted home is enough to make one fall in love with Boston all over again.

“Being in Boston . . . it’s a little bit like meeting someone who you know is smart and very accomplished but is at the same time not at all posh or flashy or arrogant,” says Shen, “but is, at the same time, very generous. It’s easy to learn and get to know them, but then you realize that, oh, my goodness, as you get to know them, there seems to be no end, there’s a depth to the personality that can only be because they’re learned, they’re knowledgeable, and they are not too self-conscious.

“Boston is like an old, wise professor who is very generous in teaching you and with whom you feel like you can continue to develop.”

He uses the same words to describe his boss.

“I feel sometimes that the mayor is not only a mentor,” he says, “but also an old wise professor that you keep learning things from.”



The long and tight relationship between Shen and Menino is precious and rare. Previous planners have not enjoyed such lasting favor. The first person to hold the chief planner position in Boston, Rebecca Barnes, left under a cloud, say many observers, after failing to accomplish an impossible task of demanding that the city have a role in the shaping of the Rose Kennedy Greenway – without being given any city money or legislative authority to do so. The project was overseen by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority.

Barnes “was the chief planner that had to be in that terrible negotiation,” says Robert Brown, a longtime architect and principal at CBT, which designed the new Mandarin Oriental Hotel on Boylston Street and the development on Russia Wharf. He says the message Barnes got from the city was this: “We have no control if it’s screwed up. Unfortunately, people are going to think it’s ours because it’s in the city. So somehow you’ve got to make it look like our park but not be our park. And spend no money. . . . She or anybody would not have been able to please the guy on the fifth floor.”

Menino can be a rough guy to work for and his affections can turn on a dime, especially when he feels that someone has countermanded, threatened, or upstaged him. Some say that Shen’s personality, and the Asian cultural predisposition to respectful deference toward superiors, is exactly the way to win Menino’s heart.

“I am Chinese, and I can tell you that his Asian culture affects how he deals with people,” says Vivien Li, executive director of the Boston Harbor Association, a waterfront advocacy group that reviews developments. “You respect your elders, you respect the position. Kairos respects the individual who is the mayor, but he also respects the office as well. You’ll never have him doing anything that would undermine the mayor, because of the way he was brought up. He’s very deferential. That’s part of the Asian culture, especially to those in power.” If the mayor was going to turn on Shen, Li says, “it would have already happened.”

The relationship is widely seen as a good thing for the development community. An official word from Shen today is believed to have even more gravitas than it might have before he was given the chief planner title. Such Kremlin-watching is especially crucial in the Boston development process, which is marked by a level of flexibility that many developers find infuriating, but, if used properly, can help a builder legally violate nearly every zoning rule that applies to a particular parcel. And if the developer is building on a parcel larger than an acre – also known as a Planned Development Area – there are essentially no zoning rules and the whole project can be designed from scratch, governed only by the rules imposed on a case-by-case basis by the BRA on issues ranging from size to use to height to setback from the road.

But the BRA won’t agree to anything unless it has buy-in from the mayor. Until you have a preliminary plan that can get this support, → PAGE 34

Things to Come

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

there is no point in spending millions to get the variances and the dozens of state and local approvals from agencies and boards that hold some sway over nearly every square inch of buildable land in Boston. The mayor won't give his support if the neighborhood where the building will sit is unhappy. So developers and communities do months of dances, meetings, and revisions to preliminary plans based on feedback. Then there's – let's call a spade a spade here – the legalized extortion known as “linkage.” This

“The barriers to entry are high,” says David Manfredi, a principal at Elkus Manfredi Architects, whose work includes the Trilogy apartment complex on Boylston Street. “It's hard to get buildings built here, but that also protects value. You're not going to see an oversupply of any building type. I've been through some processes where I've lost some height on a building, and you feel badly about it, but on the other hand, I love living here, and I love the environment, and I know it's well maintained by the regulatory process. I think very highly of Kairos and the design staff. I can point

“We don't have to have the fanciest and loudest piece of artwork from a great artist,” Shen says. He is aware of the fear that some residents have that one day, they will wake up and ask, “Oh, my god, are we in Shanghai?”

is a crucial part of the community buy-in process and includes developer promises of affordable housing units above the required minimums or a new park or a new firetruck or nice street lights or new sidewalks or improvements to the local elementary school – until the community is satisfied with the package being offered. Only then is the mayor happy. And Shen makes sure the entire process has happened before the developer submits what is technically the first official proposal to the BRA.

This is a dance that developers know they must do. With Shen occupying a more lofty position and representing the mayor more directly, developers are more comfortable taking Shen's word on a project that they've made enough revisions, created a good enough design, offered enough goodies to the community. Before, developers say, there was a sense that no matter Shen's opinion, there was always another shoe, a bigger shoe, that might drop at the last minute, scuttling the best-laid, very, very expensive plans.

Now, says Brown, “there's a sense that [Shen] has stepped up in position and responsibility. The word that is coming from him feels more that this is a word that you can trust and rely on. This is a word that will hold for a while.”

That assurance is critical to the development community.

to specific projects that got better because of the design process.”

Shen's ability to work a room and reach consensus among feuding parties is one of his greatest assets for a mayor who prides himself on putting neighborhoods first. Shen works the back routes rather than grandstanding in public to get everyone to “yes.” He is a key reason the mayor can still count on the favor of the neighborhoods during one of the most unprecedented building booms in recent memory.

“We have a mayor who is still popular even with all this development going on,” says Li. “He hasn't pissed off people who say that he sold out to developers. We often don't get everything we want, but everyone walks away feeling listened to, and that's what Kairos has been able to do.”

Menino says “Kairos is spending time at Harvard dealing with the [Allston] community right now, and the feedback I get is ‘Thank God you sent Kairos to help us.’” The chief planner “has made a huge difference in the relationship between Harvard and the community,” he adds.

SO WHAT MIGHT BOSTON EVOLVE into under Shen's watch? While he insists his personal design aesthetic is not relevant when it comes to the future look and feel of Boston, that's hard to believe after watching him draw all over an architect's prelimi-

nary designs. He likes understated, contemporary, modernist design. The man knows what he likes, and don't be surprised if that's what developers and architects begin to work into their proposals and designs.

But Shen also hates flash, or designers who toot their own horn architecturally, and he has the architectural background to know it when he sees it. "I prefer the understated and sophisticated approach," he says. "I feel like... everybody wants to make a monument. Developers push the architect to do it because they want to stand out, because they have to market themselves.

"We don't have to have the fanciest and loudest piece of artwork from a great artist," Shen says. "We want their best work that represents all that this architect has in terms of their skill and thinking but that fits into Boston, that is reflective of the Boston character." He is aware of the fear that some residents have that one day, they will wake up and ask, "Oh, my god, are we in Shanghai?"

One thing he absolutely won't abide is poorly done re-creations of design styles that haven't been considered contemporary for 100 years. So expect a virtual moratorium on historic "reproductions" like the disastrous Hotel Commonwealth in Kenmore Square, which had to be completely refaced after its unveiling – the first time, apparently, that any BRA officials noticed the facade was covered with some sort of weird, orangey plastic-looking stuff. (Shen declines to discuss how, exactly, such a thing could happen, considering the BRA's stringent review process. He cites continuing professional relationships with most of the people involved in the development for his "no comment.") Those in the design community think the screw-up came with the developer's initial choice of lower-cost facade materials, coupled with little BRA review of those materials because of political pressure to get the project done quickly.)

In a city that identifies, brands, and markets itself based largely on its historical legacy and architecture, Shen's tenure may bring a slightly less reverential approach to its preservation. Take the BRA's recent decision to raze the Dainty Dot building in Chinatown. The building, constructed in 1889, was identified as being historically significant by the city's many historical preservation organizations. The developer and owner of the Dainty Dot site, Ori Ron of Hudson Group North LLC, wanted to build a 29-story condo/retail building on the site, a density and height that would have been lucrative enough for him to also fund around 50 units of affordable housing elsewhere in Chinatown. Preservationists insisted that some aspects of the Dainty Dot building remain as a crucial part of the city's industrial past. Ron planned to inte-

grate elements of the building's facade into the new tower, but when that plan became too unwieldy, the BRA approved a plan that called for a 27-story tower, with the old building demolished and no historical references retained in the new structure. The Chinatown community's desire for affordable housing and the developer's need to make enough profit to provide it trumped historical concerns. The preservation community was gob-smacked.

"We were very, very disappointed," says Sarah Kelly, executive director of the Boston Preservation Alliance, which fought to save the building. "We had gone through several iterations of designs that were trying to reconcile preservation issues with overall design. We hadn't seen anything we were fully satisfied with, but we were pretty surprised to have a sudden movement to have the building demolished in its entirety and a total disregard for the preservation concerns."

Shen defends the decision as a compromise in which one element had to drop out. "We finally have a project that meets all of its challenges," he says. "It was a project that we had to say, what is the goal here? We had to evaluate the role of the project in delivering affordable housing. It was a well-loved building. Now we have something the community can support, the developer is happy with, but there had to be one less thing to do."

The mayor's proposed 1,000-foot tower near Post Office Square being developed by businessman Steve Belkin – currently hung up due to "financial considerations," says Shen – is one strong indication that the new city planner will look favorably on more height and density than the city has seen before. Such increased density is a virtual certainty given skyrocketing construction costs – taller buildings are more financially viable for their developers than short ones.

Despite his own design aesthetic, Shen insists the future shape of Boston's skyline will not be the skyline he wants, but the one the city needs – one that pays as much attention to the open spaces created between the buildings as to the buildings themselves, filled with structures that remind us of the time and place in which they were constructed, that are of the highest possible quality, and that can take their place next to the buildings throughout the city that honor each of the eras in which Boston has created itself.

"I'm part of a continuum of people who sat in this job," says Shen. "It is a continuum of building the city to which I happen, in this particular slice of history, hopefully to be making a positive contribution." He sees his role as that of temporary "standard-bearer for the city." Or, in an analogy more apropos of Shen's modest practicality, that of good plumbing. "You should never hear it," he says with a grin, "or ever have to worry about it. If you do, you've got a problem." ■