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Measured by design: BSA chief treads more softly in his new role

Boston Business Journal - by [Michelle Hillman](#)

In his past life as a columnist for the **Boston Globe**, Tom Keane called the Rose Kennedy Greenway “wretched” and the “world’s most expensive median strip.”

He simultaneously ripped landscape architects for placing “Tonka Toy-sized” sculptures along the Greenway and slighted city planners and real estate developers by referring to urban renewal as the days when homes and business could be torn down at will to make way for a highway.

Keane built a reputation as someone not afraid to call a trend or established opinion bogus. One of his columns weighed in on the debate over whether eating locally grown food will save the planet. His opinion? It won't.

The former city councilor had a high perch from which to opine, writing columns for the both the **Globe**, its weekly magazine and the **Boston Herald** that were often so fueled with rhetoric that sometimes he wasn't sure if he believed his own diatribes.

But now things are different.

As the executive director of the **Boston Society of Architects** — the city's largest architecture organization and a decidedly uncontroversial group — Keane is measured in his response to a question about the success of the Greenway. Instead of saying it is a failure and “doomed to become a trash-strewn no man's land,” Keane says the BSA is involved in trying to get all parties to the table as a neutral arbitrator.

“I think it's an extraordinary opportunity for the city,” Keane said. “It is, as yet, an unrealized opportunity for the city.”

The trained attorney turned politician is treading a careful line trying not to jeopardize the respected reputation the organization's former director, Richard Fitzgerald, built in his 24-year tenure with the BSA. Keane has stepped back from the public eye and is concentrating on using his connections around town to bolster the BSA and its bottom line.

“In a phrase, Tom understood the business of design and the art of business,” said Fitzgerald, who is retired.

Before accepting the position with the BSA last month, Keane was a general partner and venture capitalist on the Boston office of private equity firm **Murphy & Partners LP**. His role in the cutthroat world of business was as important as the deep connections he forged in his six years as a politician.

“It's a character trait that I think is going to serve the BSA well,” Matthew Kiefer, a director and real estate attorney at **Goulston & Storrs**, said of Keane's public status on the **Boston City Council** — where Keane was a “bit of a gadfly,” Kiefer said.

Choosing Kiefer for the head of the BSA was a savvy and slightly gutsy move on the part of the organization, said Kiefer, who believes Keane will raise the profile and policy agenda of the BSA.

And what will Keane get?

Keane, the eldest of 11 children who grew up with left-wing parents who were “deeply into public policy,” said he now will have the chance to fulfill a civic role while running a business.

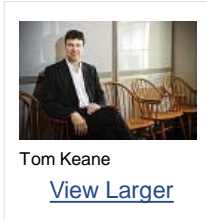
“There are sort of two loves of mine,” Keane said of his desire to combine the world of finance with public policy. “This is an opportunity to combine those two loves in one organization.”

Keane's background in venture capital will come in handy as the nonprofit BSA tries to generate new sources of revenue in challenging economic times. At the same time it is trying to hold on to its members who are struggling to find work, let alone pay membership dues. The BSA has offered to waive dues — which account for 50 percent of the organization's budget — on a case-by-case basis.

“What I want to do is somehow make sure our members ride through the recession,” Keane said.

Besides dues, the organization is funded by the trade shows it produces, such as Build Boston and Boston Residential Design and Construction. Fitzgerald said that when the BSA board was weighing whether it should expand its trade-show business, board members were apprehensive. Not Keane. He saw the potential to expand BSA's audience and reach members it couldn't previously, said Fitzgerald.

When the executive director position came open for the BSA — which is the nation's oldest association of architects with 5,000 members — board members asked Keane to submit his resume. The organization hired him from a field of 140 applicants nationwide.



Tom Keane

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A trained lawyer, Keane became aware of the BSA during his six-year tenure as a city councilor when he became involved in how design could impact communities.

Keane was asked to join the BSA's board of directors in 2000 and was made an honorary member of the organization in 2004. For the most part, Keane's involvement with the organization stemmed from his interest in how architecture shapes who we are as people, a concept he first heard about in college.

And one of Keane's top priorities is trying to figure out a way to keep the profession healthy in the face of so many layoffs. Fitzgerald said 20 percent to 30 percent of architects lost their jobs this year, and Keane is worried that an entire generation of architects, unable to land jobs, will be lost to other fields.

"It's unclear to me what is going to happen to the profession," he said. "I do think one of the real risks that's out there is that we lose another generation of students."

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