

Executive Profile: Gates & Associates' Casey Case on how COVID-19 changed the way we think about our space



Gates + Associates President Casey Case (Stan Olszewski for San Francisco Business Times)

By [Sarah Klearman](#) – Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times

[Casey Case](#) is the president of Gates & Associates — a title previously held by her father, [David Gates](#), who co-founded the firm with Case’s mother Linda more than four decades ago. The child of two landscape architects, Case says she’s always had an awareness of how she feels in any space: what works, what doesn’t and how to recreate a space with the right feel. Today, Gates & Associates is designing a diverse range of projects in the Bay Area and beyond — including revitalizations of some of the projects Case’s parents worked on during their time at the firm’s helm. Case made it a goal of Gates & Associates to put the “L” in “AEC” to emphasize landscape design alongside architecture, engineering and construction. Designers and developers “are just starting to recognize the value” her firm’s work brings to their projects, according to Case, who

says her work is still her passion even after practically a lifetime in the business. We caught up with Case to talk about how the pandemic granted us a deeper appreciation for green space, her current projects and favorite outdoor spaces in the Bay Area.

How did you become interested in landscape architecture? Did you always know you'd follow in your parents' footsteps? I grew up in the world and language of landscape architecture. It was the places my parents chose to take us on vacations and the conversations we overheard — it was unintentionally ingrained in me pretty early.

I went to UC Davis because they had a landscape architecture program which I entered my freshman year, and was able to focus on the horticulture minor. An appreciation for how a space feels always jibed with me. That's how I and most of our "Gatersers" approach design. We think about: What is a space experience like? What's good about it? How do we recreate that?

The next level is asking not only how we make this a space that feels good, but asking how it's unique to this particular spot. Historically, something happened here and how do those details come through in our design? Is it the way you can hear water that muffles out distracting noise, allowing you to be present in the space? Is it an expansive view that allows you to feel the proximity of urban activities?

Tell me about the projects Gates & Associates is working on now. We've got a cool diversity of projects. We are all about getting in early, planning and the big vision of how to integrate outdoor space and green networks. In our perfect world, we follow that all the way through. We might be working on a specific plan, and then if that generates a couple projects — maybe parks or multifamily projects — we get involved in those.

We are working on projects about buoyancy and sea level rise: the San Leandro Marina, and Mariner's Cove and Waterfront Art History Park in Vallejo. This is a whole other animal of climate change — how are we adapting to changes in our coast line? How do we create a waterfront experience that is mindful of sea level rise?

A lot of work lately has been influenced by the work-from-home movement. We're doing residential developments further out from big cities because people are interested in being less urban if they're not commuting. So if we're creating communities that are not as closely related to a downtown urban environment, what is the draw? We've been designing just being outside: things like hiking trails that allow people to feel connected to nature, which is what they're seeking if they're leaving urban areas.

How has the pandemic changed landscape architecture? It has allowed people to appreciate outdoor spaces. Park and trail uses are up. As we return to offices, the partners we're collaborating with are designing outdoor conference rooms and lunch spaces with greater emphasis. Before it was a nice amenity — now it's essential.

I'm happy to see a lot of cities focusing efforts on master planning on park spaces and recreational spaces because there's intensified use now. Whether or not the intensity of that use perpetuates, cities want to be prepared. They're asking: Where should we focus time and attention to make sure these spaces are awesome? Now there's a rejuvenated appreciation for all of it. It just increases our opportunities.

Pre-pandemic, a developer I was working with on Enso Village in Healdsburg mentioned he wanted to preserve the project's budget for landscape because the landscape can make the building worth a lot more. I was like, "Yes! Totally!" A really

great landscape creates an extension. You're not even adding square footage, yet you are, because there's just so much more happening. Especially in California, where we have so much opportunity for indoor-outdoor use.

What has the pandemic changed for Gates & Associates? What pandemic pivots might remain going forward? The remote work model has really created an opportunity for us to rethink our working space. So many things are digital now, so we don't need the layout space we had before. We've moved from San Ramon to Walnut Creek, where we could have a smaller footprint and be in a more urban environment. We're closer to BART in a place that has energy and vitality on its own and pushing forward with that hybrid model.

I'm interested to see how we take some of our technological abilities that have been strengthened (by remote work) and use them in our design pitches. In the past, we haven't always been able to be in person when someone opened up our concept or ideas. There's a lot of pressure to make our graphics communicate what we're after. Because people are a little more available with Zoom, we can walk them through our process.

What kind of sense do you seek to create in any space you're working with? It's not cookie-cutter. I respond to intimate, enclosed, shady spaces. I also look at how other people respond to spaces. Whether there's enough shade at the park, how comfortable it is, whether it's accessible to the parent lugging an ice chest full of orange slices to the soccer game. In a detailed sense, I look at — is this a suitable plant for this space? If we're adding a slide, is this material going to get too hot for a child to play on in the sun? There are always little experiences that all of us have. I catalog those and make sure I bring that into play when doing our design.

We try as designers to give people the opportunity to feel a connection to spaces. It really helps perpetuate that stewardship. Our community outreach is not just lip service. We ask what they'd like to see, because they know their space and community and its needs better than we ever could.

Where are your favorite outdoor spaces in the greater Bay Area? I go to downtown Walnut Creek all the time. I love Broadway Plaza and North Main Street. My folks' place is walking distance from downtown Calistoga, which we love. Both of those are a little more urban.

I have an affinity for San Ramon Central Park. Gates & Associates designed it 30 years ago, and in the last several years, we've helped do a renovation plan. There's also Mission College's campus in Santa Clara, where Gates has done a lot of work. They dedicated a whole central area to a quad, so I've been out a couple times making sure everything is going according to plan. That's one of my favorite spaces.

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Gates & Associates

Headquarters: San Ramon, soon to be Walnut Creek

Founded: 1977

Current employees: 30+

Description: A landscape architecture firm that provides urban planning and design services with "a mission to get people outside."

Personal

Title: President

Company: Gates & Associates

Age: 34

Education: Bachelor's in landscape architecture, minor in horticulture, University of California, Davis

Residence: Walnut Creek

SOMETHING YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT ME

"I'm a yoga teacher. I bring a lot of yoga into what I do: a big piece of recognizing how a space feels and how it influences you is about being present and recognizing how you feel in the moment. I'm also obsessed with my pet chickens."