

Kaela Fenn-Smith

Meet CBRE UK's Head of Client Partnerships and Board Member with a career spanning over 30 years driving strategic partnerships, sustainability and social impact in real estate.

“ What first drew you to the industry, and did you always know this was the path you'd take?

I've always loved interior design and architecture, particularly residential real estate, but I knew I didn't want to sell houses. Drawn to the business side of real estate, I started as a commissioned retail leasing broker at CBRE in Vancouver. The role offered the right mix of autonomy, mentorship, and a corporate brand to build a business within. After nine years, I wanted to work in a more globally influential city so in 2002, I moved to London. CB Hillier Parker took a chance on me, bringing me into their West End Office Agency team and kickstarting my UK real estate career.

Can you tell us about your early roots—where you grew up, what shaped your worldview, and how those influences still inform your leadership today?

I grew up in Vancouver, Canada with an active outdoorsy childhood - summers on lakes, winters skiing, played a lot of sports and was highly competitive, especially with my brother! My parents really encouraged me to try new experiences and anything I was interested in. I was especially inspired by my mother, a forward-thinking corporate lawyer who instilled in me the importance of curiosity, independent thinking, and speaking up. That upbringing gave me a great appetite for learning and exploring new

ideas, the confidence to be fearless and a drive to keep pushing forward. As a leader, I thrive on progress and I'm always looking for ways to make things better—I never sit still - which can be both a strength and a challenge.

What was a pivotal moment or turning point in your career that helped shape your path to executive leadership?

The opportunity was presented to me directly at Landsec when I was asked if I wanted to remain a specialist in my head of leasing role or grow to become an executive leader. I chose the latter and took on the leadership of additional departments, becoming a member of the Executive Committee and Management Board for the £8bn London business. It was the right decision for me and I've never looked back.

From JLL and Landsec to CBRE and beyond, you've led diverse teams across sectors—what's your approach to building and nurturing high-performing teams?

One thing I learned that has always stuck with me is that my job as a leader is to create an environment for people to succeed. I like to know my team and what's important to them, both professionally and personally, and I'm a firm believer in wanting my people to develop and follow their own personal ambitions. I believe this is critical for individual and team success and helps create a culture of excellence. I also hope I'm seen as a leader who rolls up my sleeves and is willing to



get stuck in – leading by example is critical in creating high-performing teams.

As former MD of Real Estate Balance, what progress have you seen on DE&I in the industry, and what steps are still needed to build inclusive leadership pipelines?

There has been clear progress with more women in influential leadership roles and capital deployment across the sector. But despite this, Real Estate Balance's latest DE&I survey shows that we're moving backwards in terms of women in senior leadership - so we still have a long way to go and we mustn't get complacent. Culture and flexibility are key to inclusive talent pipelines. Technology and hybrid working have helped with retention and we must not lose sight of their benefits as firms are getting leadership back into the office 4-5 days a week. As for diversifying the pipeline with talent from all backgrounds, the industry must continue to promote real estate careers through schools, apprenticeships and universities, opening up broader pathways for future talent.

How do you maintain a good work-life balance?

Priorities and pressures of being a working mother are fluid – they change as your children grow up and your career progresses. Nothing challenging comes without compromise and there is a lot of compromise when navigating career and family. My family has always been my priority, and there have been times in my career where I've stepped back because I knew I never wanted to live with regret. My husband and I have

WORDS OF WISDOM

What advice would you give to your younger self?

To have more faith in my own ability to learn, grow beyond my current capability and overcome my limiting beliefs. Don't underestimate your potential because you think others won't believe you're worthy of it. Know that you are capable of more than you can imagine and just go for it.

What advice would you give to young professionals aspiring to leadership roles in real estate?

If you aspire to a future leadership position, believe in yourself and build the skills you need to get there. Progress comes with hard work and learning about the environment around you. Put yourself in the right places to learn and grow. Find a sponsor if you can and make your intentions known to someone in the business you can trust. Always stay open to opportunities as sometimes life can present unexpected choices.

shared the load across our careers. I have always said to young women that a successful career is relative and you are the only person who can judge what success looks like for you. Sometimes I think my career would have progressed further if I had done things differently, but taking that time out has always led me down new roads and to different opportunities. I have no regrets. With my daughters now almost grown up, I feel like I'm entering a new phase in my career with more mental bandwidth and fewer things to juggle. I'm also looking forward to spending more time with my husband and for us to get back to playing all those sports together that have eluded me over the past two decades.

If not real estate, what industry would you work in?

30 years ago it would have been Sports Broadcasting.

Who have been your role models or mentors along the way, and what lessons have stuck with you?

I feel fortunate to have had many mentors and role models during my career - especially women whose leadership, resilience, and ability to handle enormous responsibilities continue to inspire me. Behind their success lies hard work, vulnerability, and perseverance. I'm also very grateful to the sponsors who championed me and helped me believe in myself. What has stuck with me most is that while mentorship can help shape your thoughts and ambitions, sponsorship is the thing that moves your career forward.

INDUSTRY FOCUS

What does your position as a CBRE UK Board Member mean to you, and how do you see your presence helping to shape the strategic direction of the business?

Joining the UK Board when I started at CBRE in 2020 was important to me and I was thrilled to be part of it. It gave me a voice to influence the business - especially on gender balance in leadership and sustainability. Being at the table allowed me to shape key conversations, from the shift toward real assets and renewable infrastructure to how we support clients navigating sustainability demands. Shortly after joining, I was asked to lead our ESG Consultancy. The pace of scale-up was a fantastic opportunity to build something new that was so highly in demand across the entire market. I may not have had that opportunity if I wasn't on the Board having those strategic discussions.

You served for over eight years as a trustee and Chair of the Property and Development Committee at Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity. What did that experience teach you about leadership, purpose, and the social value of the built environment?

Being a Trustee at GOSHCC was one of the most fulfilling roles in my career. We forget how much impact the built environment can have on people's lives - and how powerful our industry can be when we come together with purpose. Our greatest strength as an industry lies in our people and relationships, which gives us a real opportunity to create meaningful social and environmental value. I get really excited about that. ”

As UK Head of Client Partnerships, how do you create value across such a broad and complex business?

Our business is vast so it's not easy, but that's also what's exciting about my role. There is so much talent and knowledge at CBRE and part of my role is joining up the dots for the benefit of our clients, particularly in areas that aren't traditional or always visible. I really love understanding the strategic aims of our clients, bringing our businesses together and forming long-term partnerships that both help to solve problems and present unique growth opportunities.

As someone who bridges investors and occupiers, how do you help clients align commercial performance with long-term social and environmental value?

Bringing occupier needs together with investor ambitions is valuable to our clients, and that can include partnering on sustainability and social impact. Sustainability is now business as usual so those who invest in it will see the long-term benefits. The key is making sure both parties align asset strategies and implementation with their strategic corporate requirements.

How have investor and occupier expectations evolved over the past decade, particularly in relation to sustainability?

In my role, it's essential to stay ahead of the structural shifts affecting both investors and occupiers—and help clients navigate that change. The rise of sustainability regulation and reporting, shifts in capital deployment, and the impact on liquidity were some of the most significant market disruptions we've seen in the past ten years. While investors and occupiers are now much more informed and capital increasingly backs strong sustainability strategies, the urgency

to adapt remains. We're still in a climate crisis, and lasting behavioural change must continue for the future of our businesses, society, and planet.

What challenges and opportunities do you see for UK real estate in turning ESG commitments into tangible business outcomes?

The biggest sustainability challenge for UK real estate is decarbonising multi-tenanted built assets - an effort that involves high costs and complex timing decisions. Investors need confidence that upgrades will protect portfolio values and that the assets will be lettable for the highest values in the future. Committing to change programmes not only ensures compliance with legislation but also enhances long-term appeal to occupiers and investors, even if short-term returns aren't immediately visible.

With your “helicopter view” of the market at CBRE, what trends are you watching most closely across asset classes today?

I'm watching innovation in renewables energy infrastructure such as nuclear SMRs, and how this can positively impact power shortages and support energy intensive assets such as data centres. I'm also keenly interested in the evolution of affordable senior living and healthcare, and how they come together. The demographic and structural demand for solutions in the UK is so strong. In addition, having spent so many years developing large-scale London office buildings, I'm excited by the comeback of offices, and am watching corporate occupier behaviours closely as they continue to evolve post-pandemic.