

INNOVATIVE GROUP × CUPPLES KELLER DESIGNS



Working Session Workbook

Brand Foundation · Discovery

Thursday, September 3, 2026

1:00 to 5:00 PM · The CKD Studio

Prepared for **Amy Cupples, Keith Billick**, and the CKD team

This copy belongs to: _____

Most of the work today happens on the wall. This booklet is yours for notes, and yours to keep.

The afternoon

Mostly conversation, with the real work going up on the wall in marker and sticky notes. Here is the ground we cover.

	Block	What happens
Module 1	Welcome and warm-up	A project you were excited about
Module 2	CKD on a Page	The whole studio on one canvas
Module 3	Brand and the market	The ground you can own, in your words
	Break	Coffee and a stretch
Module 4	Vision and the numbers	Where the studio is headed, and what it takes
Module 5	The growth engine	Every idea on your plate, sorted
	Break	The rest of the team rejoins us
Module 6	The next 40	Our turn to present. What great can look like
	Summary and close	What we heard, and one next step

A couple of the middle blocks deal with what sits on Amy and Keith's own plates, so those run in a smaller room while the rest of the studio gets its afternoon back. Everyone is together at the start and together again at the end.

A process you already know

You run every project through a set order of phases. You learn the program and the site, you sketch the schematic, you develop the design, then you document it so it can be built. Today follows the same path, pointed at your brand instead of a site. Same discipline you bring to a building, brought to your story.

Your phase	Today
Programming (understand the site)	Modules 1 and 2
Schematic design (rough the concept)	Module 3
Design development (resolve the plan)	Modules 4 and 5
The rendering (show the vision)	Module 6
Construction documents (who builds what)	Summary and close

How this booklet works

Each block has a page for your notes, and the page after it explains why we asked. We save the reasoning for afterward on purpose, so nobody sits there trying to give the right answer. There is no right answer. Write what comes to mind, and we will show you where it goes.

Which does mean the next page is always a spoiler. You are all adults. We trust you.

The color code on the wall

Who wrote it (sticky color)	■ Blue is Amy. ■ Purple is Keith. ■ Green is the team.
Where it stands (a stamp on top)	● Gold is locked in. ● Red is an open question. ● Amber is parked for later.

By five, the goal is a wall full of gold.

MODULE 1 · WELCOME AND WARM-UP

A project you were excited about

Think back to a project you were genuinely excited to work on. It does not have to be a CKD project, and it does not have to be recent. School counts. A previous firm counts. Anywhere you have worked counts.

Keep it high level. What was it, and what part of it made you proud?

The project
What made you proud of it

And one that has nothing to do with work

If you had a whole weekend to yourself and money was no object, what would you spend it doing?

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Bonus: something you are good at that never comes up at work. _____

Notes as we go. Room for anything that comes up while we work at the board.

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SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

A project you were excited about

Why it matters. What excites you points straight at the work you want more of, which tells us the kind of client we should be going after for you. And the part you were proud of is usually the same reason a client picks you over another firm. We may ask a follow-up on that: were you proud because of how the project felt, or because of what it earned? Both are good answers. They just point in different directions.

Why we asked the whole room. Not everyone here has been at CKD for years. Some of you came from school, some from other practices and other parts of the country. That range is a strength, and the pride in this room is broader than any one project list.

And why we asked about your weekend. Marketing a design studio takes photography, writing, video, event help, and someone willing to stand up and talk at an industry night. Studios almost always have those skills sitting in the room already, unused, because nobody ever asked. If one of you shoots film on the weekend, we may have just found who photographs the next project. If someone writes, that is your case studies. If someone lights up on camera, that is your video. Hiring an outside vendor is our last resort, not our first.

What it becomes. The first real words of your brand voice, a first sketch of your ideal client, and a short list of talent inside CKD we can build the marketing plan around.

Your whole studio, on one page

On the wall we fill one big canvas with five zones. Two of them we talk through together at the board. Three of them are yours to fill with sticky notes.

Zone	How	What we mean
Who we serve	Sticky notes	The kinds of client you work for. Today, and the mix you would rather have.
What we make	Sticky notes	The work itself. What CKD actually delivers.
How work comes in	At the board	Referrals, repeat clients, relationships, cold RFPs. Which ones win, and which ones pay.
How we make money	At the board	Which project types are profitable, and which are the headaches.
What gets in the way	Sticky notes	Friction in the work today. Anything slow, repeated, or avoidable.

Write as many as you want, and do not overthink them. If you are newer here and the first two run dry, move to **what gets in the way**. Your view of the day to day is the part nobody else in the room has.

Your notes

Anything that surprised you: _____

SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

Your whole studio, on one page

Where this sits. Programming. You would never design a building without understanding the program first. This is the studio as the site.

Why it matters. It gives everyone one shared picture of how the business actually runs, so every choice after this rests on the same footing. It also shows something you cannot see from inside: where the sticky notes pile up is where your attention lives, and the thin spots are worth a second look.

Why two zones are conversation instead of stickies. Pipeline and profit are questions with real numbers behind them, and a sticky note flattens them. We would rather draw those two at the board and pull on the threads, because the interesting part is the overlap. If the work that comes in easiest is also the work that pays best, that is the lane. If it is not, that is worth an afternoon of its own.

What it becomes. The foundation of your brand platform, and a one-page view of the studio you could hand any new hire on their first day.

The ground you can own

Three things go up on the board so you can see what is coming. We take them one at a time, about five minutes each.

A • When someone asks what CKD does, what do you tell them?

Not the official version. The one you actually say at a dinner, or to a friend who has never heard of the firm. Everyone writes their own at the same time, then we put them up together.

Put your name on your sticky. We read them out in order, starting with Amy and Keith and working down to whoever joined most recently. Seeing how the story changes as it travels through the studio is the point of the exercise.

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B • The firms you come up against

Name the firms you lose to, or expect to be compared against. Then the honest half: what would make a client pick them over you?

The firm	What a client would like about them, and what they would not

We will pick one of these apart together rather than all of them.

C • What clients say when they say something good

Just a conversation, and we write. When a client is happy with you, what do they actually say? And when one has picked CKD over another firm, did they ever tell you why?

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One for Amy and Keith: roughly what is the public to private split of the work today? _____

SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

The ground you can own

Where this sits. Schematic design. The big moves and the concept, before any of the detail.

The first question is the one we care most about. A brand lives in what eight people say when nobody is preparing an answer, which is rarely what the website says. Reading those sentences next to each other tells us how far apart the room is, and the gap between how Amy describes CKD and how somebody three weeks in describes it is the most useful thing we will see all day. Where the words repeat, you already have your positioning. Where they scatter, we have work to do.

Why we asked about competitors, and about why clients pick them. Naming who you lose to tells us who to measure against. Saying out loud why a client would reasonably choose them is harder and worth more, because open ground only shows up once you are honest about the ground that is taken. It also gives us a real list to research before we write a word of positioning.

Why client quotes. What a client says about you sells harder than anything we could write. Those lines go to work on the website and in proposals, in their words rather than ours.

What it becomes. Your positioning line, the one sentence that says who CKD is, plus the working vocabulary of your voice guide and a competitive map we build out after today.

MODULE 4 · VISION AND THE NUMBERS

Where the studio is headed

Three questions, a board each, taken one at a time. Five minutes to write, then we talk it through before we move on to the next one.

Put a number on it wherever you can. Projects, clients, revenue, headcount, whatever you actually run the business by. All three questions want numbers, not just a feeling.

1 · Where you are today

How do you see the business right now? With the team exactly as it is, how many projects can you carry at once, and at what size? Does what comes in match the effort going out? Are you where you thought you would be by now?

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2 · Where you want to be at the 40th

2028. Two answers here, and we want both of them. Where should CKD be as a business? And where do you want to be, personally, in your own role?

CKD, the business
And you

3 · The long game

Past the 40th. Are you building something to hand on, something to sell, or something to keep at this size and make better? What does success look like when you get there?

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SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

Where the studio is headed

Where this sits. Design development, first half. Before you can sequence the work you have to know what it is building toward.

Why it matters, and what we are not doing here. We are your marketing and brand people. How you run an architecture practice is your expertise, and we have no intention of telling you how to staff it. What we do need is the target, because marketing without one is how a firm ends up with a full pipeline of the wrong work. If we run a campaign that lands you eleven projects and you can carry six, we have not helped you. We have given you a staffing problem and a reputation risk.

Why we start with today. Today's number sets the ceiling. Everything we recommend gets sized against it, including how hard to push and when to push on the price of the work instead of the volume of it. If we bring you a hundred new inquiries next week, we need to know whether that is a good day or a disaster.

Why we asked what you want personally. A firm is two people's careers as much as it is a business. If one of you wants a name on the door and the other wants a book written, those are marketing jobs, and we would rather build them into the plan than find out later. It is also a question the two of you may never have answered side by side.

Why the long game. A studio being built to hand on and a studio being built to sell are marketed differently, and the difference shows up in small choices we would otherwise make blind.

What it becomes. The target the whole plan is measured against, and the reason behind every recommendation we bring back.

MODULE 5 • THE GROWTH ENGINE

Every idea on your plate

A board each. Write down every idea you have for bringing in more work or more attention. Webinars, trade shows, awards entries, the website, a newsletter, an ad budget, lunches with the people who refer you. Anything. Big or small, half-formed is fine.

By **growth project** we mean the work you do to win work, rather than the client projects themselves.

Two rules. Do not filter. And mark each one: **E** if you are already doing it today. **N** if it is a new idea.

Start a list here

If you could add five of the right growth projects over the next 24 months, what would they be?

The one you would most like off your plate: _____

Worth thinking about while you write

You do not need to answer these on paper. They are the threads we will pull on at the board, and they are worth a glance before you start placing things on the grid.

- What is holding your best lane back? Awareness, relationships, capacity, or positioning?
- Which of these do you genuinely enjoy, and which ones drain you?
- Which of the high-effort items could a new hire own instead of you?
- Of the things you already do, which are actually bringing work in?
- Is there anything up there you have been doing for years out of habit?
- What would have to be true about the team before you could take on more?
- If you could move one money-pit item up into big bets by changing its impact, which would you pick?

Room for anything that comes to mind

Then we place them

HIGH IMPACT

LOW IMPACT

HIGH EFFORT →

Where the surprises are

SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

Every idea on your plate

Where this sits. Design development, second half. Where a concept becomes a working plan with priorities and a sequence.

Why it matters. You have more good ideas than hours. Placing each one by impact and effort turns a long list into a short, ordered plan. It shows plainly what to do first, what to hand to someone else, and what to let go of entirely.

Why we asked you to mark E and N. The new ideas are the fun part, and they are not the whole picture. Some of what you already do every month will land in the money pit, and seeing an existing commitment sitting in that corner is usually the most valuable ten seconds of the exercise. Freeing up that time is often what pays for the new ideas.

Why we asked what you enjoy. The things you mark as easy are usually the things you like doing, and that is where your time should go. A plan that has you dreading every Tuesday will not survive the quarter, however good it looks on paper.

Why just the two of you. This one is about your own weeks and your own priorities, and it is a more honest conversation in a smaller room.

What it becomes. Your 24-month roadmap and the specific first 90 days, plus a stepped-back version of the same grid from us, sorted the way an outside eye would sort it. If we think something is in the wrong quadrant, we will say so.

Where the studio goes next

This one is on us. Sit back. We are going to show what a great anniversary and brand moment can look like, from firms in your field and a few from well outside it.

All we want from you is your reaction.

That could be us
That is not us

Postcard from 2028

It is CKD at its 40th. Write the headline you would want to read.

What made it happen

SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

Where the studio goes next

Where this sits. The rendering. The view that lets everyone picture the finished thing before it exists.

Why it matters. A milestone with a date gives the whole plan a reason and a deadline, which is the difference between a good idea and something that actually gets built. Your reaction is the useful part. What you lean toward and what you wave off tells us your ambition and your taste faster than any questionnaire would.

What it becomes. The concept for your 40-for-40 anniversary campaign, and the north star the roadmap points at.

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

What we heard today

We read back what we heard while it is still fresh, and you correct us. Nothing here is final. This is the raw material, and the shaping happens on our side.

CKD in one line
The words that kept coming up
The moves that matter most

From here

The heavy lifting stays with us. You will have a recap and photos of the wall the same evening. The brand platform, the positioning, and the growth plan come back to you inside a week, all in your portal at innovativegroup.io/clients/ckd.

One last thing worth saying out loud. Amy and Keith asked for the whole studio in this room today, not just the two of them. That was deliberate, and it is not how most firms would have run this afternoon. The brand we build only works if it sounds like all of you, so thank you for the afternoon and for the honesty.

Here is to the next 40.

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A VOCABULARY TO REACT TO

Thirty words from your field

These come off the about pages of firms you would recognize: Mithun, Hood Design Studio, SWA, CMG, PWP, Sasaki, GGN, OLIN, RHAA, Andropogon, Surfacedesign, SmithGroup, Perkins&Will.

We did not hand these out at the start, on purpose. Your own words had to come first. Keep this for afterward, and for the next time you are stuck writing a sentence about yourselves.

Everyone says these

Ten or more of those firms use each one. Saying them puts you level with the field rather than ahead of it.

innovative	sustainable	collaborative
beautiful	resilient	community
placemaking	award-winning	ecological
craft		

Common, and still worth something if you can back them up

Three to five firms each. These survive when a real practice sits behind them, and die when they do not.

equitable	inclusive	contextual
research-led	evidence-based	stewardship
wellbeing	holistic	authentic
thoughtful		

Largely unclaimed

One firm or none. Open ground, if any of them are true of you.

legible	enduring	deft
responsive	rigorous	generous
precise	calm	plainspoken
dependable		

SO, WHY DID WE ASK?

Thirty words from your field

The pattern worth knowing. Almost every firm in that group leads with the same handful of words. Innovative, sustainable, collaborative, beautiful. A client reading three proposals in a row sees the same sentence three times, which means the words are doing no work at all.

What the memorable ones do instead. Three moves separate the firms that stick. They invent their own terms, the way Hood Design Studio uses Everyday, Lifeways and Commemoration. They pair words that pull against each other, like humbly curious or maximum impact with minimal invasion. And they make plain claims about doing the work well, which most firms avoid in favor of values language.

The gap we noticed for CKD. Only two of the thirteen mention being woman-owned, and both state it flatly without building anything on it. More striking: almost nobody claims to be good at complex institutional work. Hospitals that have to stay open, schools in session, public agencies and their review cycles. For a studio whose portfolio is the VA, Highland Hospital, and Fremont High, that is the emptiest ground in the whole sample.

What we do with it. Nothing yet. Today was about your words. We take these two lists home, put them next to each other, and bring you back a vocabulary that is yours rather than the field's.