

James Clark



James Clark of Kirkland & Ellis LLP has for years worked on one of the world's largest development and infrastructure projects — a Herculean undertaking in Saudi Arabia — and in the process has earned a spot among the construction law practitioners under age 40 honored by Law360 as Rising Stars.

Clark has been working on the Neom project since 2020, advising the developer, an entity backed by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, a sovereign wealth fund. When complete, the 10,000-square-mile Neom, at the northern tip of the Red Sea and east of Egypt, will comprise various new cities, rail networks, ports and other pieces of infrastructure.

Clark has advised on various construction aspects of the project, and has also advised on matters pertaining to transportation, infrastructure and power.

The biggest deal of his career and why it was challenging:

After a number of years handling high-profile train projects in Australia and then steering major offshore

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wind farm deals in Taiwan, Clark has now found himself amid the massive project in Saudi Arabia.

“In terms of the biggest and the most exciting, it's definitely where I am right now: the gigaproject platform that Saudi Arabia are putting on [and] the nation-building infrastructure that they're doing,” Clark said. “Building entire new communities and new cities out in greenfield areas of a desert country is certainly going to define the construction industry for the next at least 10 or 20 years.”

Challenges abound with such work, given in part a lack of core infrastructure in the area, Clark said.

In some areas where construction is taking place, there's no access to water or electricity.

“Very rarely, I think, will you ever get the chance to work on what is essentially a new city, and you have to not just deliver a power plant or deliver a train line, but you deliver everything that makes it work altogether, all on a uniform sort of deadline that brings it all into place,”

he said. “And I don’t imagine there being any more exciting projects for any construction lawyer in the world at the moment, and I’m just honored to be at the forefront of it.”

His proudest moment as an attorney:

For Clark, while the deals themselves create a great sense of satisfaction, it’s the relationship building with the people along the way that makes him most proud.

“If I had to think about the moments that make me really proud and happy, it’s always been to do with people,” Clark said. “To have associates ... who have never heard of a construction contract before, they rotate through your group, but when then finish their rotation, they want to place with you, and they want to develop a career with you or with me, that’s huge to me.”

While Clark has tackled myriad complex legal questions while handling projects in Saudi Arabia,

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he’s always been cognizant of the team that he’s been a part of.

“I won firmwide mentoring awards in the past and that’s always sort of a bit of a tangible way of identifying [success], but the award doesn’t matter. That’s the theme, really,” Clark said. “It’s when you find yourself having developed a team that wants to be there for you and wants to come wherever you go and learn with you, and that’s the stuff that makes me feel really like I’ve got this, and this is going to be a really successful practice.”

What motivates him:

Clark’s motivation on the surface is quite simple: “being the best at what I do in the world.”

With that in mind, Clark is continually motivated to take on the biggest and most complex projects, and to provide top-notch legal counsel along the way.

“I am chasing the absolute elite standard for not just my age but for my entire practice, anywhere. And I want to be doing the best projects to the best of my ability, and the best ability of anyone. And that comes with not just the output in terms of the thing you deliver but also that team mentality,” Clark said. “And I want to have clients that want to use me again.”

Clark believes that Saudi Arabia is “where the construction world is going to be looking for the next 10 or 12 years.”

“Being able to be head of a construction practice and the first

construction partner that Kirkland has had, I get to build that here. And if that doesn’t make you want to get out of bed and if you don’t get excited about doing that as a law firm partner, then you probably don’t really want to be a partner at a law firm. You might think you do, but you don’t.”

Why he’s a construction attorney:

Clark didn’t know he wanted to be a construction lawyer when he finished law school, and it wasn’t until he started working on construction matters at Herbert Smith Freehills that he discovered a passion for that line of work.

“I just happened to rotate through the projects group, and I just loved everything about it.”

Clark said he had done previous rotations where he focused on corporate and litigation work, but it was the construction work that really lit a spark.

“The projects practice was something entirely different, and a hybrid of the legal and the commercial and the practical that I didn’t find in any other group. And something about the fact that when you have a major developer that comes to you with a long lead project and says, ‘This is what we want to get done. We want your help doing it,’ you know that your job is not just to align what they’re doing with the law, which is a lot of what legal practice can be in other groups and not something I find particularly fulfilling or creative,” Clark said.

How his practice will change in the next 10 years:

Clark is seeing his practice change rapidly firsthand, given that he's the only construction-focused partner at Kirkland, and given the rapid rate of change in the Saudi construction space.

"My world is going to change, and hopefully what we're doing here is going to change with the rate of growth and success that we're going to have as a firm in this region, and that's my remit, and I'm absolutely loving every part of it."

Clark believes that when historians later look back at the 2020s, they will remember the decade

for Saudi Arabia's infrastructure projects, not unlike how historians remember China's emerging economy in the 1990s.

"Saudi Arabia is by itself changing the construction industry. ... It's putting unprecedented numbers of dollars and projects and delivery timelines together all at once. And

it is going to test the market for contractor capacity, it is going to test the market for materials and labor, and it is going to necessitate legal and socioeconomic reform to accompany it, to make it work," Clark said. "And it's all going to have to happen at a speed that no other country in the world has ever done."

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