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## FROM MITCHELSTOWN TO MICHIGAN: KEVIN ROCHE'S FORMATIVE YEARS

ELLEN ROWLEY

*The following text comprises excerpts from an interview with the distinguished architect Kevin Roche, which was conducted in April 2008 as part of research into the culture of architecture in Dublin from 1940 to 1980. The interview is prefaced by an introduction to the architectural practice of Roche and by a general consideration of the role of the oral history account within architectural research. A central concern of this research is the relationship between Dublin-based architects and foreign influence, especially that of North America in terms of educational opportunities and architectural typologies and technologies of production. Unlike most of the Irish architects who travelled to the United States following the Second World War, Roche did not return to Ireland and instead established a markedly successful architectural practice in America (and beyond). In 1982 Roche was awarded the highest international accolade in architecture, the Pritzker Prize and the community of Irish architects, via the Architectural Association of Ireland, responded accordingly with an exhibition and publication of Roche's work. Twenty-five years later, while Roche's first Dublin building is under construction in the docklands area of the capital city, it seems appropriate to record his voice once again. In this oral history account, the architect goes back to his "origins" in speaking of his formative years before and shortly after his arrival in the architectural Promised Land that was post-war America.*

### **About Kevin Roche: Irish Architect in America**

Kevin Roche is celebrated as being *the* Irish architect in America. His architectural biography is quite remarkable in that it charts the voyage of a young Irishman who—following his education at University College Dublin and periods working in the renowned modernist firms of Michael Scott in Dublin and Maxwell Fry in London during the later 1940s—journeyed to post-war America where he studied briefly with the iconic German modernist Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe in Chicago, worked on the United Nations complex in New York and then, in 1950, joined the seminal firm of Eero Saarinen and Associates in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Within the context of Saarinen's practice, Roche worked closely with Eero and became the head of the design department until the latter's untimely and premature death in 1961, whereupon Roche and a partner in the firm, John Dinkeloo, spearheaded the practice bringing Saarinen's unfinished projects to completion. As such Kevin Roche found himself on the "front-line" of architectural design and technology in the dynamic post-war climate of 1950s-1970s America.

With regard to aesthetics, usage and technology, Eero Saarinen's architectural "brand" has come to singularly define this mid-century juncture in architectural history. He was feverishly prolific in terms of both securing significant large-scale commissions and then designing bold and expressively modernist schemes such as the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (St. Louis Gateway Arch, 1947-68), the General Motors Technical Centre (Warren, 1948-57), and the Columbia Broadcasting System's (CBS) Headquarters, (New York, 1960-64). This tendency

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**KRJDA Architects, National Convention Centre, Docklands, Dublin (1998-2010)**

*Image Courtesy of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates Architects*

continued under the directorship of Roche and Dinkeloo so that it is neither exaggeration nor cliché to assert that Kevin Roche—born in Dublin in 1922 and brought up in Mitchelstown, County Cork—has subsequently become one of the major shapers of corporate America’s architectural make-up during the second half of the twentieth century.

Looking at some of the well-known projects from Roche-Dinkeloo’s portfolio, such as the Ford Foundation Headquarters (New York, 1963-68), the Knights of Columbus Headquarters (New Haven CT, 1965-69), or the Union Carbide Corporation Headquarters (Danbury CT, 1976-82), there is a striking stylistic inconsistency—that is, in terms of the overall disposition or massing of each project, and then the particular materials and structural technologies employed; we move respectively from glazed-urban-block to monolithic-highway-skyscraper to exurban-concrete-groundscraper. Such physical eclecticism comes unquestionably out of Saarinen’s legacy which also, conversely, points to the practice’s consistency in relation to approaching each commission in its own terms. While all three examples are indeed corporate-headquarters commissions of the same era, their site contexts are diverse and ultimately, the function of each building within the particular role and specific meaning of each corporation has been carefully considered by Roche-Dinkeloo; with Roche responding to the requirements of the client through contextual design and Dinkeloo reacting to that design with technological brilliance.

It would seem that this fruitful process underpinned the partnership, until John Dinkeloo’s death in 1981, resulting in a body of works that are only knowable as a collective by their large scale and their clarity of form(s). As such, Roche’s designs are never signature nor are they identifiable through an aesthetic moniker in the universalistic terms of say, Mies Van der



**KRJDA Architects, Union Carbide Corporation Headquarters,  
CT, USA (1960), aerial view**

*Image Courtesy of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates Architects*

Roche. Instead the specificities of the client-needs combined with the desire to push the boundaries of architectural technology have informed the practice's varying, yet always productive, portfolio over the decades. Like Saarinen before him in the 1950s, Roche's architecture is reactive rather than prescriptive and in this, he continues to be an uncannily humane and intelligent proponent of monumental and technocratic architectural modernism in the service of the specific community. As architectural critic Vincent Scully wrote in 1974: "Roche-Dinkeloo have been dealing with the truly inhuman scale of modern corporate society as it actually is, and have been creating arresting images of it which reveal more about it to us than we knew before."

**The Terms and Conditions of a Conversation**

The significance of an oral history account in the context of architectural research lies principally in its role as a supplementary archival object, to be considered alongside graphic representations, written records and, of course, the building itself as a cultural document. The subjective spoken-word is unreliable in positivist terms, dogged as it might be by nostalgia and memory-lapse, but just so, in its defence, the retrospective narrative contributes to our "witnessing fever" whereby memory and testimony become critical constituents in the compiling of a less reductively "academic" history.

In this way, Kevin Roche's account of his formative years which is presented through the informal meanderings of a conversation between him (as subject) and the researcher, inadvertently sketches shifting portrait(s) of a somewhat Bohemian 1940s Dublin, a desolate

post-war London, a burgeoning Chicago and a triumphant New York, finishing up in the heart of the post-war industrial design project that was 1950s Detroit. It provides architectural history with vignettes of a time and place which are defined by the seductive immediacy of the architect's statement. As the recollections flow, peppered with colourful anecdotes, the researcher learns more than library catalogues or contemporary journals can communicate about, for instance, the reality of travel opportunities for the young Irish architect or indeed the ethos of architectural education in 1940s Ireland.

Finally, while the researcher may be adamant to situate the subject in the terms of national, even postcolonial identity—i.e. the impoverished and folkloric Irish architect rising heroically through the ranks of American post-war imperialism—the primary tool of simple conversation can turn such theoretical pre-concluding on its head. For, as Kevin Roche says, “I never thought that I was an Irish voice or anything like that”; and in one blow, administered by real-primary-actual evidence, the researcher's by-line moves from the ever-catchy, “Irish architect in America” to the somewhat cumbersome, “international architect of American leaning but Irish wit.”

ELLEN ROWLEY I want you to talk about your educational experience in Dublin and why it was important to go to America at the end of the 1940s....

KEVIN ROCHE I went to UCD (University College Dublin) to the School of Architecture in 1940; it was then very small. There couldn't have been more than forty students in the entire five-year programme. The school was located in the back of the main building at Earlsfort Terrace in the vestiges of the Exhibition Palace for the Dublin Exhibition (1865). At that time (during the war) it was used as a place for filling sandbags. There were plaster casts of architectural details and statues surrounded by sandbags. The drafting rooms were on the balcony with probably ten or twelve people in the entry class. The first day we were taken down to the basement. Professor Butler—who had a very lugubrious German accent—said, as we were standing in his office, “There are no plums in architecture!” Well, it hadn't occurred to us that there might be! But in any case, this was a new negative for us to consider.

Kevin Fox and Pat Scott and Wilfred Cantwell were all in the class ahead of me. My class was singularly undistinguished by any people who became successful later on, with the exception of Michel Jammet. Do you remember the French restaurant Jammet's? Michel was the son, and he was a very flamboyant character. I don't know that he ever actually graduated. And then there was Tommy Ryan, who became my best friend and went to work with the Public Works.

ER Tommy Ryan won the Clonskeagh church competition (1954) and then it was taken away from him—that was the big controversy....

KR Yes, he could very well have. He was very talented. I, of course, was a complete idiot, and I had no idea what was going on at all. I'd never really seen a classical building. However, I won the Batsford prize for measured work. We measured the old City Hall. So, I took Tommy and my brother—who was also at UCD doing, among other things, geology. We went up to Galway to measure three neo-classical buildings. But fortunately or unfortunately it happened to be the week of the Galway Races...so there was lot more drinking than there was anything else.

In any case, the First Year was terribly classical-oriented, and we rendered acanthus leaves and Doric columns. It was heavily focused towards Greek Revival. There were two lecturers, Johnny (Griffith) and Matty (MacDermott). Matty and Johnny were both great but

didn't really have much of a clue about what was going on in modern architecture. I remember that Professor Butler died after the First Year, and then we suddenly realised that there was something called "modern architecture."

ER Was that through Professor J. V. Downes?

KR No, there was a gap. Professor Downes didn't arrive until the Second Year was almost complete. So in the Second Year I remember one of the projects was to design a house. I had a brilliant idea—I was absolutely knocked out by this idea. I designed a staircase in the house that was circular; I'd never seen a circular staircase. And I designed the house with intersecting wings, with the circular staircase in the middle—a large circular staircase. And Matty, in reviewing it said, "Sure you'd never get a coffin down those stairs!" This was an epiphany for me, the sudden connection between the brilliant idea and death, "But sure if someone died upstairs, how would you get him out?"

ER This was the reality of the architectural crit?

KR The awful reality! Of course, we were very isolated because the war had started and there was no connection with the rest of the world.

ER And do you recall looking at journals or anything like that?

KR There were no journals.

ER So there was no library to speak of?

KR The library sort of ended about 1930 or so.

ER Oh right ok, so there was no *Architects' Journal*, *Architectural Review* or anything like that?

KR No, there was nothing; absolutely nothing that I remember. My father was creamery manager in Mitchelstown and very energetically had started a pig-farm, among other endeavours. They had taken over the grounds of the Mitchelstown Castle. He had also started a cheese factory and had some Swiss scientists come to help, and when cheese was made there was a product called whey which was normally thrown away. It was discovered that it could be fed to pigs. So a small piggery was built and when I came home on summer vacation after the First Year, my father asked me to design a piggery, and I designed a piggery which ultimately housed five thousand pigs and supervised its construction.

During the construction of it, I had four masons building a concrete-block wall. There's an angle bracket that is placed against the wall to hold the work platform. The men were building the wall and I wanted them to go higher; and they said, "No, we can't go higher because the concrete is not set yet." I insisted they raise up the platform another step and then went back and sat down because I wasn't doing anything except watching...and the next thing I know, the wall collapsed. I had four angry masons who wanted to kill me.... I learned about lateral loading on walls!!!

ER Did the piggery work, and did it last for long?

KR Oh yes, it may even still be there.

ER We should photograph it: the first Kevin Roche building!

KR In the Third or Fourth Year we heard of Corbu (Le Corbusier), probably the apartments in Geneva (Maison Clarte, 1932) were finished by then. Then the Pavillon Suisse (Paris, 1930) somehow came to our knowledge; so much so in fact that I copied it for my thesis-project.

ER Where do you think you saw it? You must have seen it in a journal, in *The Architectural Review* perhaps?

KR We must have seen it in something pre-war? I don't know. Maybe the *Review*. Because of the war of course—it was very disturbing, we were very isolated—and the sense of complete isolation was awful. We had no idea what was going on in Europe. On the 6th of June 1944, we heard about D-Day as we were going into an engineering exam. You feel a lot of things, you feel you're out of it...the rest of the world is wrapped up in this madness and you're just here doing a stupid engineering exam.

ER Do you recall feeling frustrated by that, as a young man?

KR I was frustrated by a lot of things. But we drank a lot of Guinness. There was a bar down at the corner (Lower Leeson Street) across the street from Hartigans which everyone used to frequent. We'd go there almost every evening; we'd scrape together a few bob and have a few pints...and then go down to Davy Byrnes. That was our life. I must say that Wilfred Cantwell, Pat Scott, Kevin Fox, and Fred Hilton were very, very talented. We became aware of Michael Scott because of the Irish Pavilion for the New York World Fair (1939). And when I graduated, Kevin and Pat and Fred were all at Michael's. His office was on Clare Street I believe, where there was a book-shop. This was in 1945. And I got a job with Michael for £2 a week.

ER Did you just waltz in there or did he pick you?

KR I waltzed in there and at the same time I got a job as a studio assistant at the university and I also got a job at the Bolton Street School of Architecture. I had £6 a week.

ER So you were working in the three places? Full-time in Scott's?

KR Well, I had to take time off to do the studio teaching. So, gradually we became aware of things. After the war a Dane came to manage the office, and then we moved to Merrion Square. For some reason I was in charge of moving Michael's office and Pat designed some furniture. They were bringing in the furniture and I was running around telling them where to put stuff. They referred to Michael's office on the second floor as "Nelly's room."

I was working on the Donnybrook Bus Garage—the shell. Ove Arup was just starting working; he stopped by every now and then to visit so I got to know him a little bit. And subsequently they were working on a building for McCann's Auto. And I had the brilliant idea of pre-casting sections of boxes that you could pile up on top of each other. I was trying to convince Arup that this was a great idea, so I built a model of it. And he kept arguing with me—he was a very taciturn Dane, of course—and frankly I irritated him to the point that he grabbed

the model and threw it down onto the floor and stood on it. He said, “You see, it has no lateral support!”

ER Were these cubes?

KR [Sketching] Square like that, with a floor and ceiling; they’d be open in-between but of course there was no way to brace them laterally. So, Pat Scott was called Percy in those days: he was assigned to work on Michael MacLiammoir’s apartment; MacLiammoir was living with Hilton Edwards and they were at The Gate theatre and they were excellent—acting and producing. And Pat came back with a story that Michael had locked the liquor cabinet on Hilton; they each had different keys so they’d lock it on each other...so Pat had to try and resolve this issue of how Michael and Hilton would each be able to have access! And then I worked on Busaras as it’s called now, but it was called the Bus Station then, for a little while.

ER Was Donnybrook Bus Garage the first thing that you worked on in Michael’s office, do you recall?

KR I remember doing a rendering for something else...out near Lamb Doyles, in the Dublin Mountains. But I don’t have a clear recollection of actually working on anything to be very honest...

ER Before I ask you about the atmosphere, etc. in Scott’s office, can we return to the Donnybrook Bus Garage? Do you know who was behind that design?

KR I worked on it. Arup was the one who came up with the structural design of the shells.

ER Now the atmosphere in the office—was it not serious?

KR It was great. You know we’d start work at ten o’clock and we’d go on lunch at about twelve thirty or one o’clock and we’d have a couple of pints. And then we’d come back at three o’clock and we’d go home at about six o’clock.

ER There probably wasn’t much work to do?

KR There was a fair amount of work. I got a terrible shock when I went to work with Maxwell Fry and they started work at nine o’clock. I couldn’t believe it. What the hell were people trying to work at nine for? I was cursing it. And at Chicago they started at eight o’clock. I couldn’t believe it! A real eye-opener!

ER Was that the same as all the offices in Dublin at the time? Very relaxed?

KR Yes, it was all pretty much like that, relaxed. But Michael was terrific, really terrific. He had a very good sense of design himself, and he gave all these young kids a certain amount of rope and let them do things. It was one of the best experiences I think one could possibly have.

ER How long did you last there?

KR I worked for about a year and a half and then I asked Michael if he could help me get a job in London, and he wrote to Maxwell Fry. That's how I managed to work at Maxwell Fry's. I stayed with Max for about six months and then went back and worked for Michael for almost another year. But when I came back, Fred Hilton and I had become friends and we said, "We really have to learn something about architecture." We decided to go to the States together to do graduate study. When I was at Max's office, I had read something about Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe being the "future of architecture" and a very modest man. I was very impressed.

I decided to apply to I.I.T. (Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago) and then I decided to apply to Yale and Harvard at the same time. So, incredibly we were accepted to all three. We went to the American Embassy to get a pass, and the official at the American Embassy said, "Why don't you get a Green-Card, I've got lots of them here? I'll just give you a Green-Card." I didn't even know what a Green-Card was!

And so we just got a Green-Card. We came as graduate students. I had no intention of staying at all.

ER Did you feel that you were unable to solve architectural problems at Michael Scott's?

KR No, no, we were very full of ourselves. We knew what to do. We knew how to do everything. That wasn't a problem. The reality was we just didn't have a clue! We were all very sure, very positive.

ER Looking at Busaras sixty years later, it would seem that you all did know what you were doing.

KR It works very well, yes. Largely due to Kevin Fox and Wilfred Cantwell; Wilfred was more of a manager. He was a good designer but I think he was really the one who had enough common sense to be able to do the drawing – to make it all happen. He was also the designer though; I mean he did the working drawings. And Kevin was a brilliant guy.... Kevin Goulding was the other name.

The choices then were limited. You wouldn't want to go to Europe. Although I'd decided that I wanted to study with Corbu (Le Corbusier) and Alvar Aalto; and I wrote to them all and naturally they threw my letters in the waste-paper basket, I suppose. Europe was still in pretty bad shape in 1947/48 and I couldn't speak French. I was a totally hopeless student...

ER Did you think about going to Frank Lloyd Wright, to study at the Taliesin Fellowship in Wisconsin and Arizona, at that point?

KR No, for some reason I didn't. I had been very impressed by an article on Mies Van der Rohe. And you know, we were only beginning to be aware of the origins of the modern movement. I remember being shown, by Matty MacDermott, the railroad station in Helsinki, and I didn't like it at all; I couldn't make any sense of it. Little did I know that I'd get to work with Eero Saarinen later on!

But there were virtually no photographs of architecture, well, contemporary architecture then, and there wasn't much going on anyway because of the war. Before the war there was the Bexhill Pavilion (De la Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 1935) by Chermayeff and I was very impressed by that.

ER And you were aware of Eric Mendelsohn, as he came over to Dublin with the Architectural Association of Ireland (AAI)?

KR Oh yes, but not while I was there.

ER And Walter Gropius came over....

KR That was probably later, no?

ER 1937: Mendelsohn and 1936: Gropius. You wouldn't have started your degree by then.

KR No, I began my degree in 1940. My father took me up to university to sign me in and he was under the impression that I was going to Medical School. And I kept it quiet. And would you believe, he just took out a twenty-pound note for the term...that was it. That's all it took to get signed up, twenty pounds....

Anyway, I have no good recollection of any information of substance coming from the outside during the war years. And then, after the war there was virtually nothing going on in England at all. Except Berthold Lubetkin and Tecton—they had done the zoo project—the Penguin Pool—in the late 1930s. So the Penguin Pool was the first thing, when I went to London that I went to see.

There were several English artists who, not wanting to fight came to Ireland during the war. And I had one friend who dribbled a lot. He was a painter, and he was painting the bridge over the Grand Canal at the canal-lock; and he was arrested...for spying! As if he was going to bomb the lock!

But what I do remember is Noel Moffett. Noel was a big inspiration—Noel and Margot. He was out there explaining the New World to us, and prefabrication. And this was about 1943 or so when he surfaced. He was largely instrumental in having the show at the Mansion House called Post-War Planning, this must have been in 1946 I would guess. We were all helping Noel set it up, volunteering. And when Noel was away for a bit during the day, some guy came in and said, “No I don't want that there, I want it over here. I want that moved back,” and so we changed all the exhibits around.... But it turned out he was just somebody who'd walked in off the street!!!! Noel came back and he was absolutely livid! But Noel was very good....

ER Did Noel teach you, did he come into UCD?

KR No, he was never a teacher when I was there. He was doing some master planning at Silver Strands in Portmarnock. I remember we were working on a model of that and I had painted the strands silver with silver paint, and he said, “You idiot, it isn't silver—it's not the colour, it's just called Silver Strands!!!” Anyway, I pulled out of the whole thing (i.e. Dublin) then in the fall of 1948.

ER Did Fry's not work out for you? Did you not like the local temperament?

KR I hate to confess this but I left after six months because if I left after six months I wouldn't have to pay income tax!

ER A tax-exile aged twenty-five!

KR What a terrible admission to have to make! They were kind enough to take me and I just left....

ER What was that office like and post-war Britain?

KR Max was great. Jane Drew and Max lived upstairs. And they argued all the time so you could hear them. And in the office itself there were three ex-RAF pilots and a young woman and a Danish architect...that was the office. To be honest about it, they were so accepting of me. They could have been mad-as-hell because I hadn't been in the war, being neutral and everything. They never mentioned it. It never came up. They were wonderful. They brought me to their homes and were very hospitable. They were very open-hearted. It was miserable in London then because there was a meat shortage. And everything was "shortage." We used to go to a kind of a soup-kitchen, a place where the taxi drivers and labourers and all would go. There was a hole in a plywood wall. And they'd pass out your dinner for one shilling.

ER So, it seemed much more desolate than Dublin?

KR It was, much more so.... I was living in Tavistock Street in a boarding house with Kevin Goulding. Kevin Goulding got me into that boarding house. He had gone to England a little while before me and was working with Fredric Gibbard. We used to hang out a lot together. Kevin subsequently went to New York in 1949 or 1950 or so. But there really, other than the Tecton and Lubetkin buildings, wasn't much going on in terms of modern architecture. Kevin and I went up to Cambridge and slept on the cricket green all night...we got driven off by the police. So, that sort of thing—we would think nothing at all about going off...going off and just doing something. We went to Ely. I was very impressed by that.

ER Did you do any travelling while at university?

KR No, you couldn't go anywhere! There was no petrol. I mean there was virtually no travelling around.

ER So you hadn't seen any of Scandinavia or any of that?

KR Oh no, you couldn't. So, England was really the first stop. And then Fred Hilton and I decided to go to I.I.T. and we actually flew, if you can believe this, from Dublin to Shannon to New York which was about fourteen hours. We flew into the Marine Air Terminal and then we changed to La Guardia which was just opening up. And got on a plane and flew to Chicago, arriving in Chicago at about eleven o'clock—five planes later and non-stop—and the only address we had was State and 33rd which was where I.I.T. was going to be; it actually hadn't happened yet...it was a little farther south.

ER Of course, the campus was only being designed then....

KR Yes, the first building was under construction. We arrived at about eleven o'clock and there was nothing; everything had just been demolished. It was just an intersection with bricks lying around everywhere. We were standing there like two fools!

ER Exhausted fools!

KR And I remember in the taxi coming in there was a radio playing which was advertising for a “Funeral Home”!! I had never heard of a funeral home. It was introduced with a song—that was so bizarre.

ER Were you really nervous?

KR No, no, no, no.

ER Did you have ideas of Chevrolets and films, i.e. glamorous America?

KR No, there wasn't much of that. And we walked down the street and then we saw a sign that said “Drug Store” and you know, that was a big ‘un; a drug store, my goodness, they’re actually selling drugs here!

So we came to a place, which was a dormitory, and it happened to be a dorm for I.I.T.; and we explained ourselves so they gave us a room for that night. Later on that night a student was shot on the steps of the dorm—it was a very rough neighbourhood, south Chicago, in those days. So we were very lucky we didn't get in trouble.

The next day we got to the admissions to sign-in, and of course we had no place to live. Because Fred and I were travelling together they assumed we were gay. And there was a rather large gay group who were sort of disciples of Mies van der Rohe so they suggested 18 South Prairie Avenue. And we went there and there were about six gay couples living in this place. And Fred and I got a bedroom—I had the first pair of pants that had a zipper and I took down my zipper and I said to Fred, “Does that give you a sinking feeling in your heart?” We laughed so much about it.

But they were wonderful, and we had a great time with them all. They would throw cocktail parties. And I never understood why they would put ice in drinks—they had martinis. And when it was our turn to have a cocktail party, I couldn't see wasting money buying ice; so I went out and scooped up some snow and put it into the cocktails. Of course it being Chicago in the middle of winter, the martinis came out black! It just shows you the level of innocence.... The naiveté! Mies then, this was a whole new experience. There were only about ten graduate students: There were two or three Americans, there was somebody from South America, and there were some from Europe, and there was one man from Egypt, and us. It was very interesting. And that was quite a revelation....

ER Being mixed with all those cultures?

KR But Mies was the revelation: Such a formidable presence with the big cigar, the occasional rumbling voice. And he would say, “You could do dat but I would not do dat you know.” And that automatically shot your scheme down; that was the end of that. He had a tremendous, tremendous impact on all of those people. I mean it was like an extremely rigid Roman Catholicism, almost a religion. Absolute black and white; absolute, absolute....

ER So it was quite cultic?

KR Quite a cult, yes.

ER As much as you would imagine that Taliesin was as well?

KR I believe just about the same kind of thing as Taliesin, yes. We went out to Taliesin later on. We had a friend who was out there—a Japanese guy—and he was terrified that we were there because he wouldn't want to be seen shaking hands with these outsiders. But part of the problem was trying to get money—you couldn't transfer money out of Ireland. My father was able to make some connection to New York so he was able to get \$500 or so which is what we were living on, and he got some for Fred as well.

ER The thought was that you'd be getting rid of domestic currency basically?

KR Yes, but it was worthless. You couldn't exchange it for dollars; it was worthless. The same thing was true in 1946. Kevin and Fred Hilton and, I think it was Wilfred, and I went to Switzerland and my father had arranged—because he had some connections in Switzerland—for us to be able to get the money to do that. And we flew on one of the very first flights after the war to Paris, and then got a train to Zurich, then got a bus down to Milan, and in Milan they still had a sign of where Mussolini had been hanged. So, then we went to Geneva and we saw—I had forgotten about that—but we did see the Corbu (Le Corbusier) stuff...in Geneva. Paris was devastated. There were still rocks in the street you know, they hadn't cleaned it up. And Milan was in frightful shape, absolutely frightful! Everybody was out on the street begging—it was horrible.

ER So you went to Paris, Geneva and Milan?

KR We went to Zurich; we went to Lausanne and southern Switzerland. So we saw some things in Switzerland. And Kevin (Fox) was very good; he had researched it so he knew where everything was. Then, in Milan there was of course the railroad station (Milano Centrale, 1864-1931). And then Paris: Well, all the obvious things in Paris, but there wasn't anything new.

ER You didn't see Villa Savoye (Le Corbusier, Poissy, 1931)?

KR No, so we spent about three weeks travelling. But in any case we ended up in Chicago and ran out of money. Then we went with the Egyptian who had bought a car which was a former taxi, and we drove out West and visited the Grand Canyon and all of the national parks. We went to Los Angeles, and I remember we arrived in Los Angeles, expecting sun and it was the first snow they'd had in Los Angeles!

ER At this point did you leave Chicago because you ran out of money or were you just going for a trip?

KR No, we went for a trip. And when we came back we had no money at all! But it was really good because we saw everything, and then we came back to Chicago.

ER Did you see Richard Neutra's work and some of the Case Study Houses (1945–1966)?

KR Yes, we saw Neutra and we went to see a couple of those houses that we knew about. And we also went to Taliesin. Anyway, we came back to Chicago and I packed my bags and I got

on a bus to go to New York and I had two twenty-dollar bills, that was it, and I arrived in New York....

ER Did you have enough of Mies?

KR I'd had enough of it, I said, "I got the message, and I don't want to waste anymore time."

ER You're a very independent person aren't you?

KR Apparently.... I was.... Well, you know you were anxious.... You want to do something. You want to get out.... And Fred decided to go home at that point I think—although he may have worked in Chicago for a while. And I worked briefly in an office in Chicago, but then I called it quits and decided to go to New York. I wanted very much to work at the United Nations which was just starting up, and I really believed in the idea of getting rid of nationalism. The thing that used to drive me nuts in Ireland was when you went to the movies and you had to stand up at the end for the national anthem. And the whole war was about nationalism. I believed in the idea of an international world, of all of humanity getting together and those hopes that existed in those days. So I wanted very much to work there. I went the next day to the UN office which was being run by Harrison and Abramovitz. I begged the man to give me a job—a man called Johnson, very nice—and he gave me a job as an office boy, which didn't bother me to take. I just wanted to be there in the middle of it all. I graduated from that to being a draftsman after a couple of months. And we were right on the site of the building—and looking out at this, and the photographs of Corbu and all those people.... That was really pretty exciting.

ER So, you really felt then, that at last...

KR Yes, you were beginning to connect to the world, to this whole new dream of architecture. And I, the usual total idiot in doing everything, I was checking shop drawings and I just made marks, I had no idea of what I was doing. I just made marks on the drawings to make it look as if I checked something, because I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing.

When I was with Maxwell Fry, we were doing a building in Africa, in Somalia and it had a truss on it and I was pretending that I'd calculated the truss so I covered the truss with numbers, calculations and then I just drew it. So, I was doing the same thing at the UN.

Then that winter I decided to go back and visit my parents. And when I came back, I was laid-off. So then I was out of work. That was very typical of New York in those days; you'd get laid off overnight. There were no unions. The process was that as a draftsman you shifted from one office to another whenever they had a job. So it was nothing to be laid off with two days' notice. That was the way it was.

ER Was it normal to get a trans-Atlantic flight home to see your parents?

KR I went on a boat; I went steerage class on a boat.... And so then I was back in New York, really broke this time. And I tried every office in the telephone book and I started off with the well-known ones and I went everywhere and I finally got a job with a guy called Anthony J. de Pace, who was doing Gothic churches—terrible, terrible stuff. And he'd say, "You got them drawings yet, Roche?" he would say to me. I was trying to design an altar, it was a Gothic altar.... And so I had a friend who had been at the UN and she for some reason knew Eero

Saarinen. Eero had come to New York looking for people, as he was building up his office at the time.

ER General Motors (1948-1957, Warren, Michigan) I suppose?

KR General Motors, yes, had just started and so, this friend suggested me. This is an old story but I'll tell it anyway: I was really flat broke, I mean I was begging money practically, and Kevin Goulding was helping me out; he had a job in New York and was helping me to get something to eat. So my cousin Kathleen Ryan arrived with an MGM contract and an expense account; she was on her way to Hollywood. We'd been very close together growing up, and so we went out on the town and hit all the night-spots the Twenty One and El Maroc and so on. We drank. We were both used to drinking a lot in Dublin. And after about a week of that it was time for my interview with Eero. He was at the Plaza Hotel and the interview was at 8 am. He was getting up, and I was sitting on the bed, and I had been up all night, and he had a very...boring...Finnish...voice...where...he...would...speak...very...slowly. And I fell asleep! While he was talking to me! And he woke me up and he hired me anyway. And of course the last place I wanted to go in the world was Detroit.

ER So you were caught up in the glamour of New York?

KR Oh yes. And so the next day or so, I borrowed \$100 from Kevin and got on a train and went to Detroit, and then got a bus out to Bloomfield Hills. The office was very small—there were about ten people in the office then. The first day I had to go and find a place to live, and they suggested a place. There was a Mrs Looney who had a boarding house (well, it wasn't really a boarding house, it was a bedroom) on Purdy Street in Birmingham. And I went there, and it was a dollar-a-day. I spent about five years living in that place! Because of course, we didn't get paid very much then. I was very lucky because General Motors (1948-1957, Warren, Michigan) was just starting. And I worked on it for about five years. And I worked mostly on the lobbies. That was a wonderful experience.

ER It seems to me to be the epitome of the post-war project?

KR It was, and I think one of the reasons I was hired by Eero was because I had gone to I.I.T., and he was fascinated by Mies at that moment in time. And so, that was an entrée for me.

It was a great experience. Eero was terrific, absolutely terrific. He was a brilliant draftsman; he was a great designer; he had an engaging personality. And he really wanted to get at the bottom of everything—dig, dig, dig, to find out: What are we trying to do here? What is this problem? How are we going to solve it? And that was a great experience for me. The office gradually got bigger and bigger and bigger. And then we attracted a lot of people who subsequently became successful in their own right. So, it was a very lively spot. Detroit was interesting at that moment because it was just emerging from being the “arsenal of democracy,” as it was called.

ER And was that coming out of the industry?

KR Yes, there was nothing—no such thing as catalogues for locks or hinges or anything. You had to almost invent everything. There was practically nothing off-the-shelf.... You had to

virtually design everything. Door handles. Sure, you could get the old Victorian-type things but nothing modern.

ER Nothing streamlined. So, it would have taken ten years for that to become common?

KR That was pretty much the case, yes.

ER So, would you say then that that's obviously the point when you start designing, properly?

KR Yes. I learned a great deal. Everything I know, I learned from Eero really. And his approach to things: How to work, the consistency, and the endless "never give up" sort of attitude; you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, until you feel that you've got it right. And then the whole craft of how to explain that to a client; because as you know most architects aren't very good at explaining or communicating...in terms that are understandable for the layman.

ER When you started designing in your early days at Eero's office, did you feel that you brought anything to the table that was distinctively you or from an Irish legacy?

KR I didn't think of it in those terms really. I never thought that I was an Irish voice or anything like that. I never connected that way. Eero was a Finn and of course he spoke like a Finn. But again, he never connected that way. Nationalism wasn't uppermost in anybody's mind. There was very little flag-waving in America and all of the current expression of nationalism. Certainly in that part of the world...I think that it would have been a little different in other parts of America but certainly there it wasn't like that. And then there was the influence of Cranbrook (Cranbrook Academy of Art, founded by Eliel Saarinen, 1932)—there was Charles Eames and all of those people coming out of there. Cranbrook was more international. The focus was really more international than it was local.

ER The universal...did you get a sense of trying to find the essence of the community for who this building would serve?

KR Yes and I learned that from Eero. Because of course Mies never talked about that sort of thing at all. His was all an abstraction; architecture was remote from the soil of human contamination. He discussed art....

ER Mies' architecture was aestheticised really, wasn't it? So, if you're going to talk about a post-war architectural culture you've got technology (albeit somewhat fearfully having seen technology's effects in the war), married to the need to assert identity at community-level....

KR And to recognise that the buildings are part of, not only a construct, but also civilisation—that they're the habitat for people and that is the ultimate responsibility. Not the egocentric art-aspect of the thing. But really more the service, which in no way impeded the possibility of creating art but the creation of art was not the primary objective. We all of course hoped to do it. But it was in the context of providing something decent/sensible/forward-looking—all the adjectives you could imagine. And it was as much shedding the past as it was forging the future.

ER Can I talk to you about influence for a few minutes?

KR Yes, sure.

ER I would say that the more I think about influence the more intangible it seems, the more stupid it is as a discussion point really, because everything influences everything. However, I've broken influence down to the collective and to the individual. I'd be interested in finding out who influenced you, other than Eero, maybe even going right back.... Do you think that any of the "indigenous" architecture in Ireland, say the Georgian vernacular influenced you?

KR Well you know it's an interesting point because Mitchelstown is a small town generated by two squares (King's Square and Kingston Square, 1776-1823). Off to the side of Kingston Square there's the castle which was built in 1700 or thereabouts and we lived on that square, which was at the entrance to the castle. We lived in what I think was the guest house for the castle. But there was an axis that way and there was an axis this way [sketching], and there was a Protestant church here and a Protestant church there. And the lower portion of the green was for indigent Protestants.

ER So, this is urban planning?

KR Yes, urban planning on two axes. And the axis into the castle had wonderful, gigantic lime trees. In my mother's family there were eight or nine girls, and they all grew up in a one-room cottage in Tipperary which had a mud floor and thick mud walls and a thatched roof. And there was one remaining sister called Maggie, sitting there at a turf fire—smartest woman I ever came across in my life. She was an incredible woman. There was something wonderful about that—that you could form the clay into a house with two and half foot thick walls, white-washed, and then the thatch overhead. But there was something great about that because you just took what was at hand to make those houses. And they still last.

So, the Georgian architecture in Dublin was an influence. Merrion Square—since I worked there, I lived there just near the axis down to what was called the Pepper Pot—a very nice church (St Stephen's Church, 1821)—on Upper Mount Street. And of course, the Customs House (James Gandon, 1791) and the Four Courts (James Gandon, 1802).

ER And the river—the relationship of the buildings to the river?

KR Yes, and the relationship of all that. Those are all influences but not in a tangible way that you can point to, but they're all there in the background. There's something in the back of everybody's make-up....

ER It's in your memory somewhere...?

KR That's right. And the modesty of the simple house; the turf fire in the winter when we went to Aran later on, years later—we took the children over to see those houses in the west. I guess most of them are probably gone by now.

And in the Cotswolds in England there's something wonderful about the unpretentious community creating an unpretentious yet beautiful environment for living in, which is very gentle and very simple and very elegant. And there is much of it in England—there's something very

nice about that, something very gentle and something very hopeful about the honesty again of the human spirit.

ER I understand. Then coming over to America: the highways, the technology, the scale of things must have blown your mind a bit?

KR The highways weren't there when I arrived first because that was a programme that started later; the interstate started in about 1952-53 under Eisenhower. I was very impressed by the small towns in the western part of the country where there was much the same thing as a settlement. And there might be a green or a square in the centre, or a little pompous building which would have been administrative or a town hall or a church or whatever.

ER Community is at the root of all of this really?

KR Community-driven kinds of things, yes. And I think the vernacular or community project is an equally good mark of measuring civilization as is the pompous building via the kings or the popes or the dictators.

ER Would you have been familiar, later on, with Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*?

KR Yes, I read that book. He made very interesting points—the very opposite to Mies Van der Rohe. I think it's a good reminder and a good measure of where the profession ought to be. I don't know where the current interest of architecture really is. I mean it has morphed from being a service into being a, "Look at me, look at me, look at me" kind of thing, right now.... I think that it's fine to have such buildings but they are really only "flowers" decorating something.

ER Very often any building which is monumental in scale is accused of that. And you've made a lot of big monumental buildings but the community and the function, whether you internalise it or you make a visual marker to the highway, is always at the root of it.

KR Well, I was impressed by the highway in later years. By the logic of it and the relentlessness of it in terms of the cost-effectiveness of it and no pretence for art at all, but they can be very handsome. And I love the Golden Gate Bridge, which from an aesthetic point of view may be kind of ugly but it's really marvellous.

ER Lastly, have you any concluding comments in terms of Ireland today?

KR I believe that Ireland has stopped being "Ireland" and has become part of Europe, that it stopped being a country drifting in the middle of the Atlantic. Instead it tied itself to the big continent and the great cultures of Europe. I'm sure that that's had a profound effect on the psyche. You're Europeans now, you're not just Irish. And the "heritage" of the Irish as an oppressed nation for so long, that's all gone. You're part of this wonderful Europe, and you are building on that.

NOTES

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