

Kevin Roche Interview

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Scale

Interview with Kevin Roche, 1970
Conducted by John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz¹

Heinrich Klotz Johnson and Rudolph think of themselves as artists. What about you?

Kevin Roche I wouldn't want any part of it. I think that kind of description is meaningless. I've been accepting the term "artist" in a very narrow sense. If you use it in the general sense of creativity—sure, fine! But, if one uses it in the sense of making decisions which are essentially concerned with visual aspects of a problem, or in the sense of making an architecture which comes solely from stylistic concepts, from Gothic or two-dimensional or three-dimensional or volume principles, then I simply don't want anything to do with it.

HK And yet, you create architecture which demands visual response.

KR As I have said, that is one of the responsibilities as one proceeds down the path. The total responsibility is much, much greater.

HK That means that when you get to the visual questions, you could go far beyond a functional solution, even far enough to symbolize a force in society. You would not exclude this possibility from the design process?

KR Oh, no. One might even search for it. One needs to find out what "role" a building will play in society. We are talking about a democratic architecture, as opposed to the architecture of a monarchy or a totalitarian state. One architecture must exist for people.

HK But as a pluralistic society?

KR In a pluralistic society, there are multiple needs. In a society which also has an inheritance of violence, and destruction, and fracture of moral standards, architecture must help stabilize. I don't want to say "restore," because that suggests going back, but you should help create a more stable society. **It isn't just the business of being visually pleasant, or exciting, or stimulating, or momentarily titillating, or anything like that. It truly has a role, an organizing role, which produces satisfying results for people who live, and for the few years they have to live.**



I'm fond of thinking of the island of Manhattan, for all of its faults. It tends to be an unguided prototype of where we're heading. The nice things of New York, and the evil things of New York, will simply spread ...

—Kevin Roche, 1970

Federal Reserve Bank Tower²

The site has some peculiarities. The problem is to provide the maximum sensible office on a small constricted block, and at the same time achieve maximum public good in terms of open space and proper relationships to other buildings. First of all, the area is very congested. There are street vendors on the sidewalk, which is fine. It is legitimate activity and one would want to encourage it. And there's an extraordinary scene when they close Nassau Street to traffic. Even closed, the population still crowds the whole street.

JohnCook Mr. Roche, New York City obviously raises crucial questions for the architect. The Ford Foundation is your major building there, to date [in 1970]. Among the many New York projects you now have in process is the Federal Reserve Bank Building. What problems do you face in this special case? It is a very unusual solution and surely will raise many questions.

KevinRoche I can summarize an illustration of the process in a very abbreviated form. As far as the owner is concerned, this is a very simple problem. They want to build 400,000 square feet of office space, just straight office space; they are desperately in need of space. The requirements are very simple, since they have no desire for anything else but this space. However, they would like to be responsible about it in some civic way.

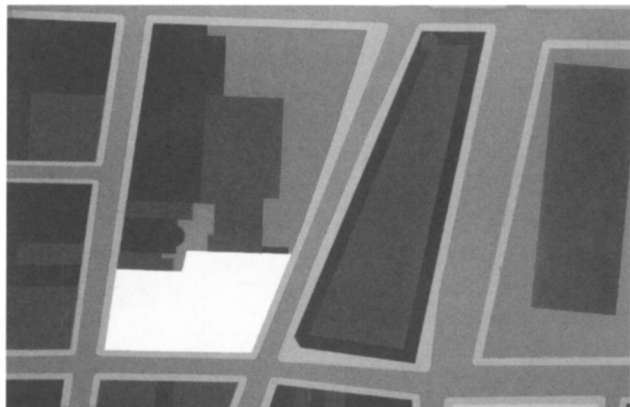
JC Do they prescribe what they mean by civic responsibility, or do they just indicate general sensitivity?

KR No, they just feel something should happen. This is a site in Lower Manhattan.

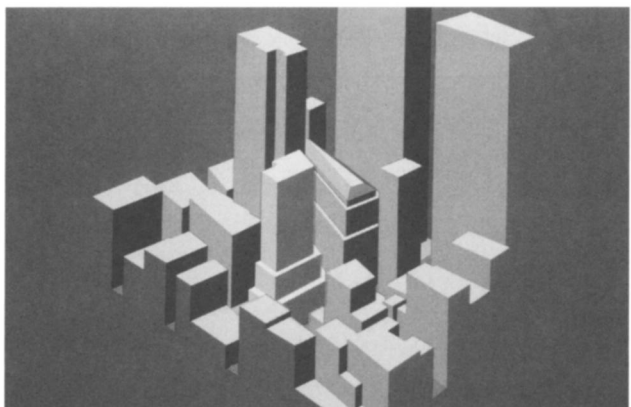


Up to this point, all these people were on the sidewalks. Now, one feels that the public good would have something to do with providing a little bit of space, in this case, on the ground.

How can this be achieved inside existing zoning regulations, regulations which really work best for usual rectangular blocks? Given the existing zoning laws, there were three basic possibilities. The first is called standard zoning,

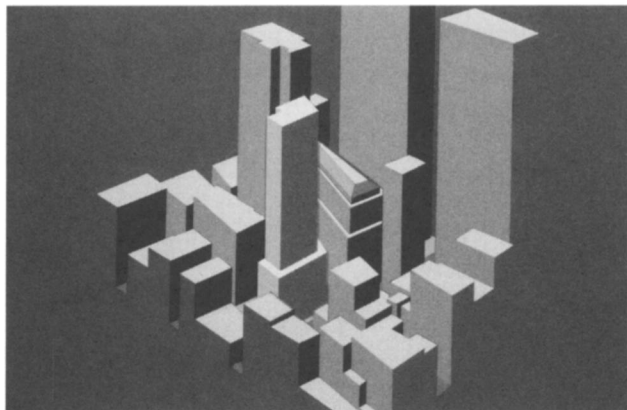
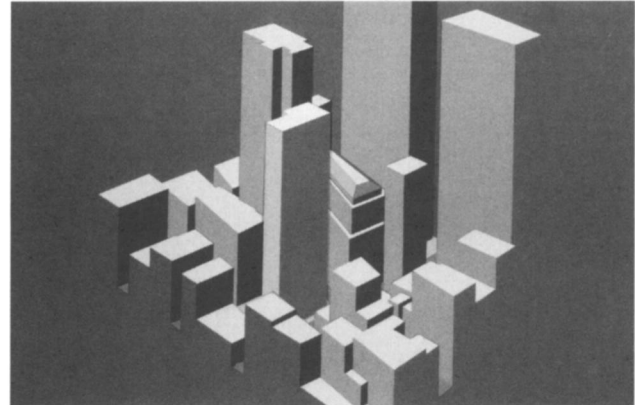


It is approximately 21,300 square feet [area in white] and has an irregular shape surrounded by three narrow streets, Nassau Street, John Street, and Maiden Lane. We are dealing with a block in which there are relatively new buildings, a plaza, and a church which is a landmark. This is the piece of property they have been able to acquire. The building is an expansion for the Federal Reserve Bank, which occupies one of the adjoining blocks.



In this, the sky-exposure plane is relaxed and the bulk is increased to a maximum 18 FAR [Floor Area Ratio]. If you do this, and if you provide the required plaza, you can build eighteen times the area of the site. The third possibility permits a sheer tower to be built by increasing lot occupancy for reduction of permitted bulk.

and that means that you build right off the property line. You can go up 85 feet and set back, and you get inside a sky-exposure plane, which is an imaginary plane receding at an angle of 2.7 to 1, until you reach a point at which the area of the building is 40 per cent of the area of the site. For this, you can build fifteen times the area of the site. Now, in order to encourage the widening of the sidewalks and to set back from the street, there is the so-called alternate zoning.



So these are the three basic alternatives. Now we apply these general restrictions to our particular site. With standard zoning, we could build a building which consists essentially of three boxes stacked up. The first box is 6 stories high at 21,600 square feet per floor, the second is 14 stories high at 14,000 square feet per floor, and the third is 16 stories high at 8,500 square feet per floor; this makes 15 FAR. This solution does not fully utilize the site potential, for more than half the floors in this building would be too small to be useful. It provides no public space and generates no satisfactory relationships with existing buildings.

JC What is the total square footage in this proposal?

KR It would be about 320,000 square feet.

JC Wouldn't that be sufficient?

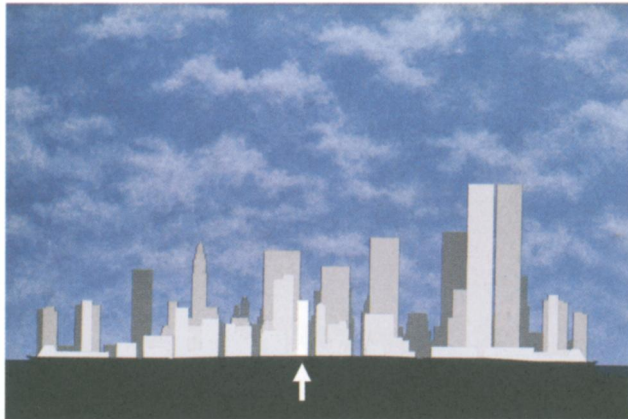
KR Well, it doesn't reach the maximum potential of the site, and it doesn't reach the requirement of the owners, who would like to have about 400,000 square feet. And, also, it doesn't really relate to the other buildings in the area, so there's no reason to build it.

The second possibility would be alternate zoning. It gives maximum bulk for setbacks from the building line and creates a building composed of two blocks, one of 11 stories at 14,000 square feet and another of 28 stories at 8,500 square feet. You get in the same dilemma. Here we could realize 380,000 square feet in bulk, but much of it is unusable because the floors are too small. Also, the relationships to other buildings are really not improved very much.

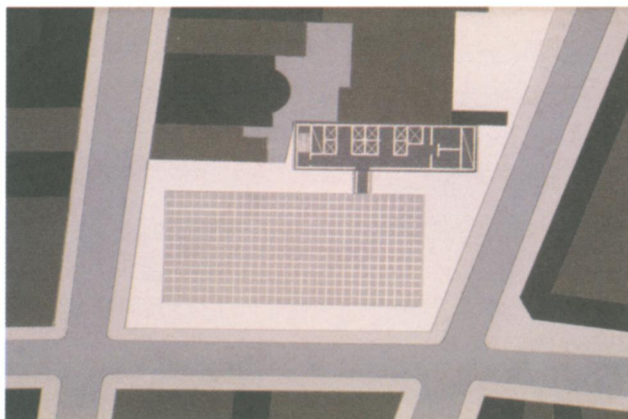
The third possibility would be the sheer tower at 50% of the site. This would give us the first chance to make a rectangular building. The other ones were following the lines of the property, which would result in odd-shaped office spaces very difficult to use. In the tower proposal, we could build 34 stories at 10,300 square feet each, still too small a floor.

With this piece of property, and with the existing zoning, we can't build a sensible building. It is apparent that no satisfactory solution is available inside existing zoning, neither in terms of functional requirements nor in terms of public good. We could build it right off the street, but we would be compounding an already hopeless situation. If we set it back, we improve things a little bit, but then we've broken the street line. On the one hand you achieve something, on the other hand you don't.

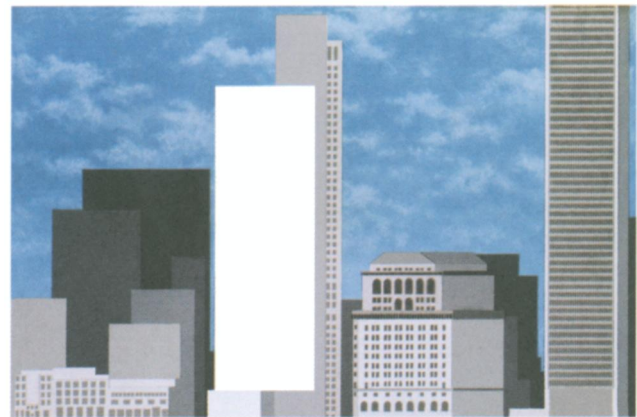
This is the point at which you decide there is obviously nothing productive in the existing situation. If we restate the objectives, perhaps a solution can be developed which will make a variance from the zoning ordinances desirable. The first objective which we have to consider is the providing of sensible office space. Sensible office space means a rectangular floor of a large enough area, at least 13,000 or 14,000 square feet. The second objective, in view of the congestion of the area, is to provide the maximum open space that can be provided, possibly landscaped, and certainly accessible from the street. But, in fact, if one were to follow this objective to its logical conclusion, he just wouldn't build the building at all. The third objective has to do with relationships of one building to another. It needs to relate to the tall office buildings on the block and to the other large rectangular buildings in the vicinity, Chase Manhattan and Marine Midland. That's the containment. If we don't pick up the responsibility for establishing those relationships, then it will never happen in New York. The fourth objective has to do with planned development on the lower tip of Manhattan. These are enormous projects, the two towers of the World Trade center near Battery Park, the U.S. Steel Building under construction, and the existing towers just mentioned. Our building will be surrounded by these monsters. They would place us in a hole. From the occupant's point of view, he would be in a canyon.



Let us reconsider the whole project with new objectives in mind. First, an office building has a core. Then, the rectangular floor space should have a minimum of about 13,000 square feet. We place this floor space in the center of the site, but remove the service core of the adjoining building, thus providing clear, unobstructed space with a maximum window exposure.

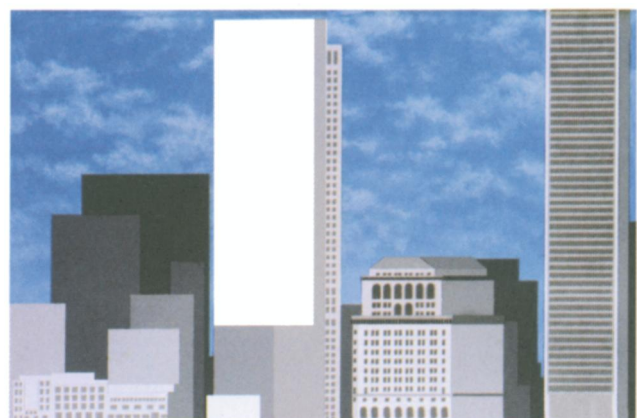


To do this, of course, we have to violate certain setback regulations, but we'll proceed anyway and see how we come out. The resulting building block would normally look like this.

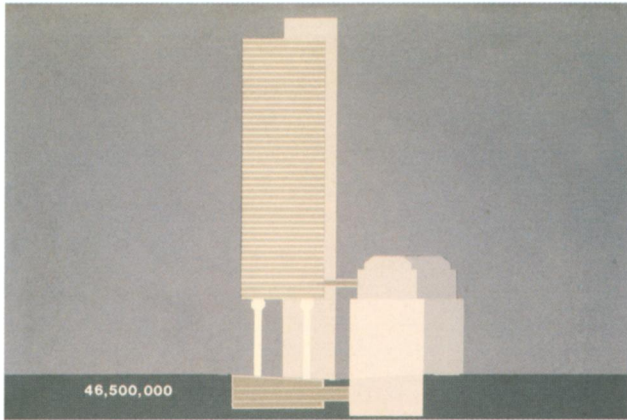


It has some kind of lobby, 20, 30, or 40 feet high. Another objective is to relate the buildings to the old Federal Reserve Bank across the street. After all, they are occupied by the same people.

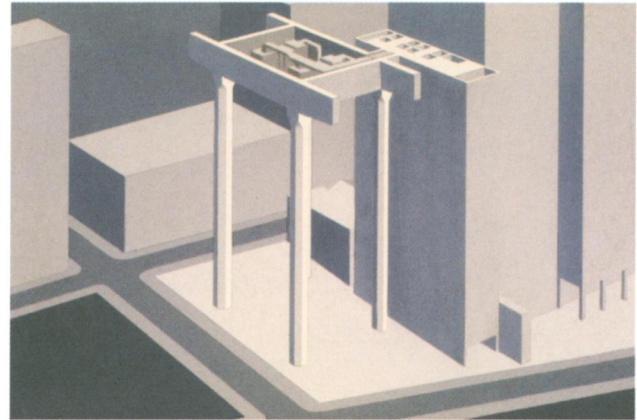
Now, here's the point where we make the big step. We say we don't want a lobby down there anyway. That's not anything for the public good. Also, we would like to get out of the hole. Let's take the whole building and move it up! Let's move it up to be in line with the cornice of the old building across the street.



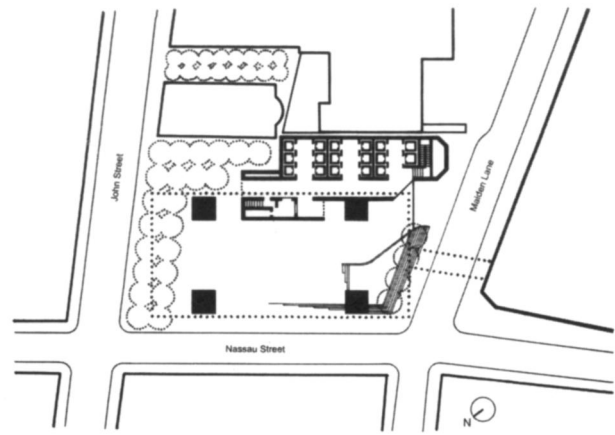
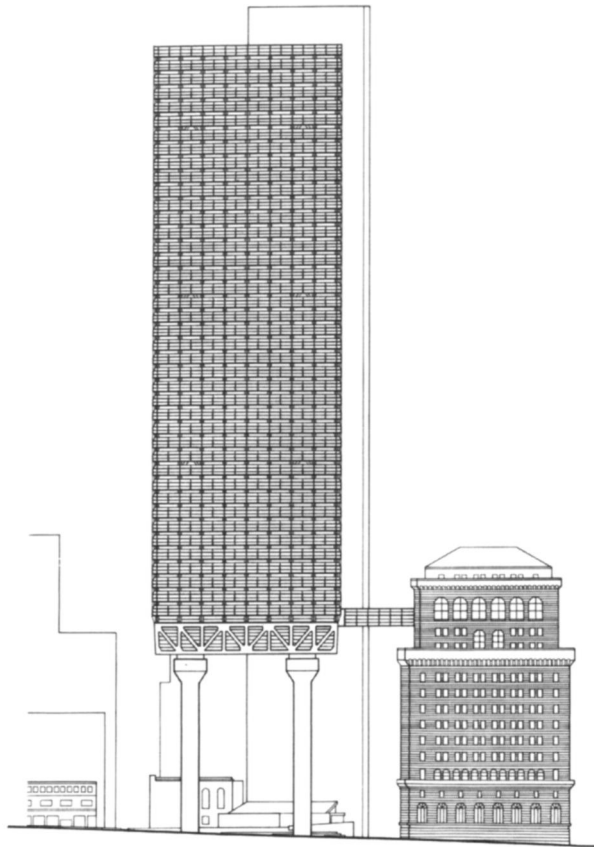
There the building starts. Now, we have space down below which is unobstructed, and a new relationship is established with Chase Manhattan and Marine Midland. The building would be carried on legs 165 feet tall, 11 feet in diameter, and covered with the same stone as the old Federal Reserve Bank. This vertical location is now sufficiently high that, for all practical purposes, the building doesn't exist on the ground, and a public space can be formed.



The four columns support beams which enclose the mechanical system.

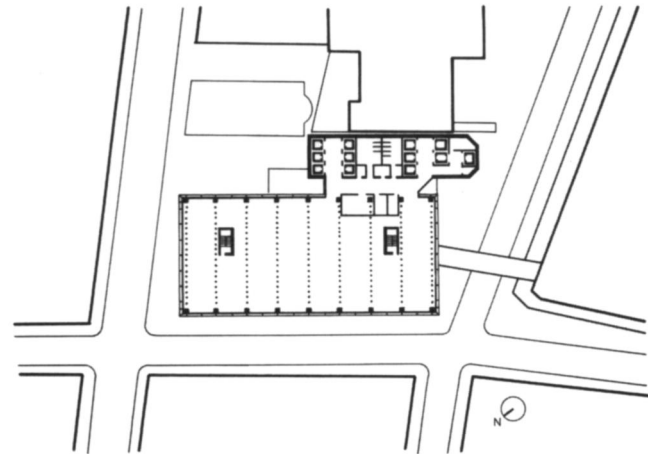


The office block sits on these beams and goes 31 stories high. This is the building we can build. The public space on Nassau Street can be provided in consideration of certain violations of public zoning regulations.

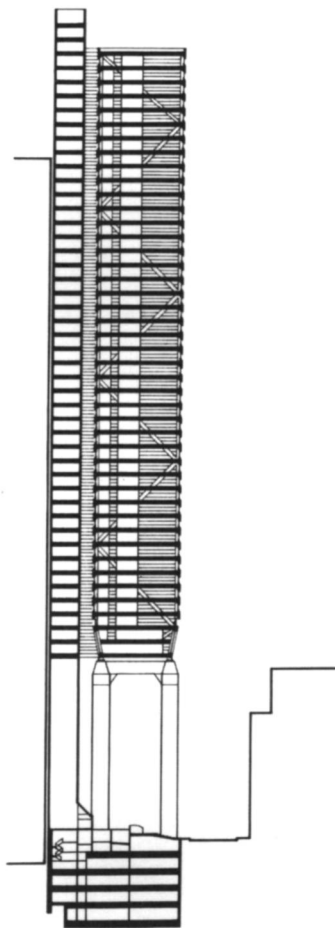


Ground level plan.

50ft



Typical plan.



JC In this abbreviated presentation, you have given us the process out of which this astounding result grew. When the building is completed, the casual observer will not be aware of this background. One first impression will be the strong difference between those very brutalistic legs and the thin glass skin of the building itself.

KR The supporting system is all concrete. The steel structure rests on this. We proposed reflecting glass as a complete skin on the outside so the structure is isolated from the thermal movement. We are shedding the bulk of the thermal load. We would have three different reflectivities at each floor. The lower section would be 100% reflective. The section above the head level would be about 75% reflective. At eye level, the glass would be relatively clear. Every office would be shaded above and below.

JC How do you treat the space beneath the building?

KR The plaza could, of course, be designed in many different ways. It's such a small space that one might use a kind of cobblestone similar to the Swiss or Bavarian towns where you get a moving surface.

Heinrich Klotz No concrete?

KR No. The plaza is accessible all the time from the street. Of course, the relation of the church building to the plaza is important as well. It's the site of the first Methodist church in the United States. The first two buildings burned down, and this is their third, built in 1850. It's an historic monument. For the plaza, we will provide a very strong central light, so that late in the afternoon there will be some illumination, even in this space.

HK A substitute for the sun.

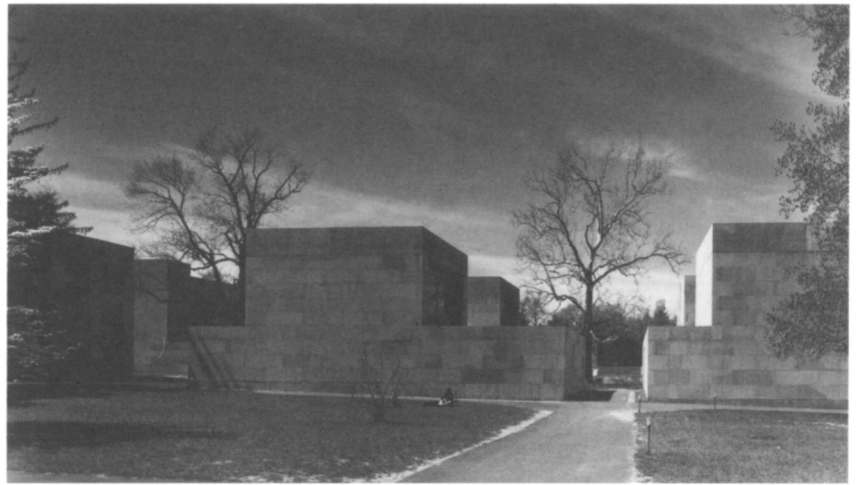
KR The sun cannot penetrate down onto the street.

HK Was there any objection from the clients?

KR The point that you couldn't build a sensible building going the normal way didn't get through at first to everyone. But they finally approved it.

Interview with Kevin Roche, 2006

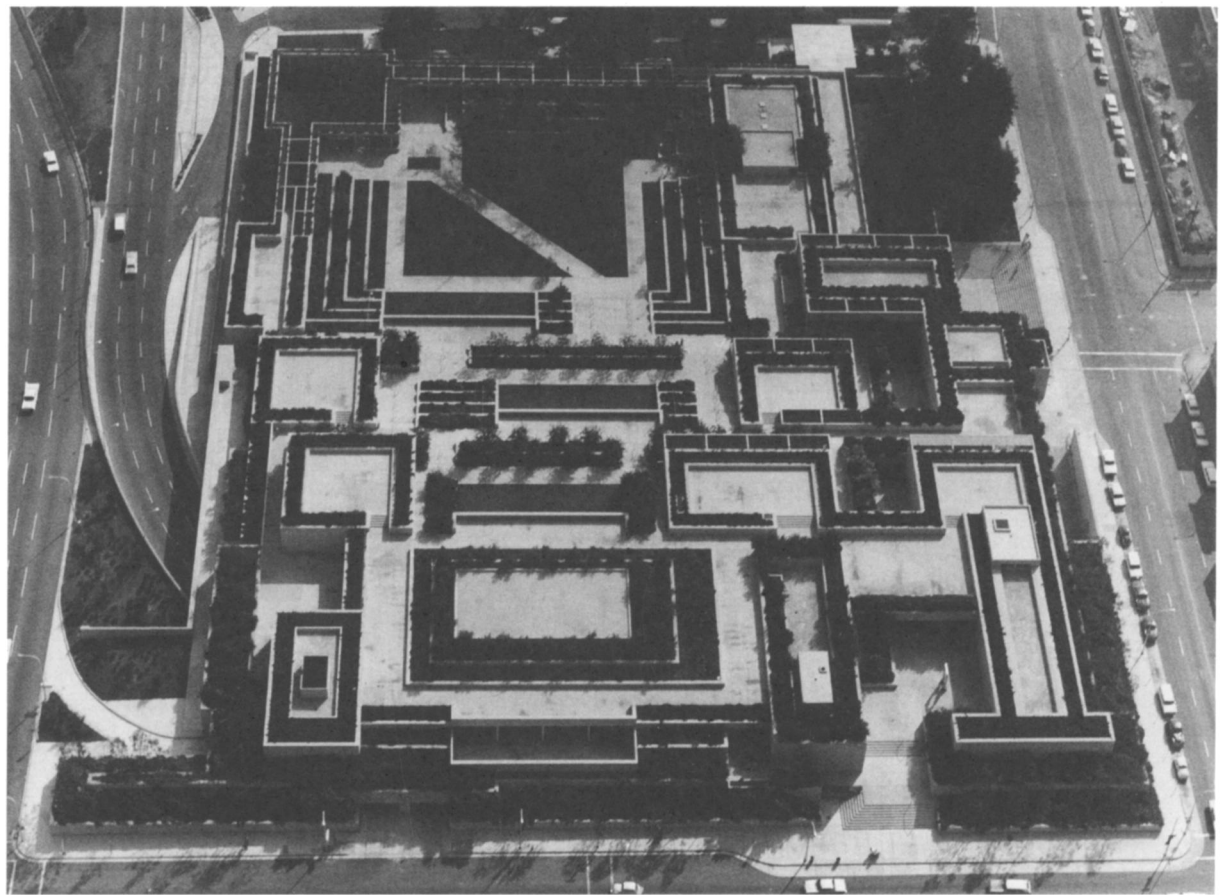
Conducted by Perspecta 40



Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, 1973.



Oakland Museum of California, 1968.



Oakland Museum of California, 1968.



Federal Reserve Bank Tower (unbuilt), New York City, 1969.



Federal Reserve Bank Tower (unbuilt), New York City, 1969.



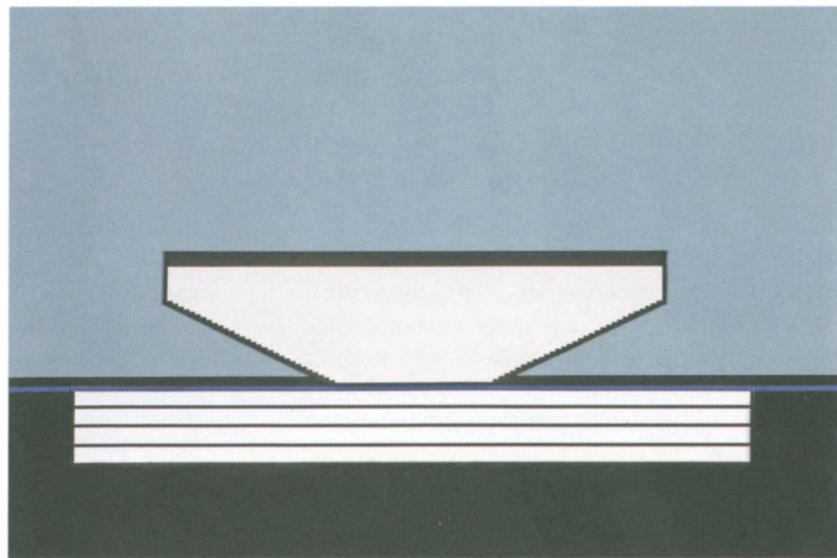
Ford Foundation Headquarters, New York City, 1968.



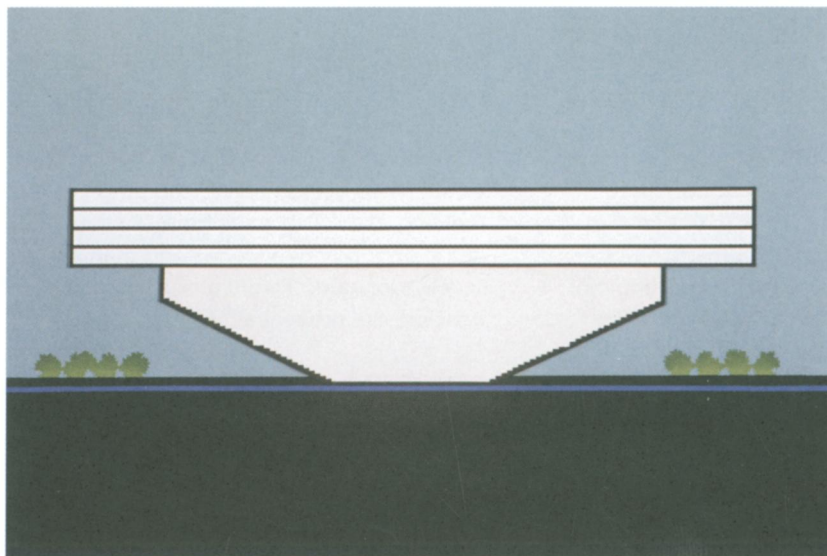
Ford Foundation Headquarters, Interior Court.



Knights of Columbus Headquarters (1969) and New Haven Veterans Memorial Coliseum (1972), New Haven, Connecticut.



“The technical problem we had with the Coliseum was that there was a high water level on the site; we couldn’t put the parking underground.”



“If it couldn’t go on grade, the next logical thing was to put all parking on the top.”

Monumental architecture is something I don't want any part of. I don't believe in it. I don't think it has any part in our society ... You now have the aesthetic tools for making larger buildings. How do we go from this small thing to the next thing? Of course we have to have a scale whereby we can build a whole city.
—Kevin Roche, 1970¹

P40 We see in your work—especially in the late '60s and early '70s—an interesting approach to addressing scale. With the Oakland Museum of California [1968], the large building almost disappears below ground. With the Center for the Arts at Wesleyan [1973], you break the large program up among smaller pavilions. In the case of the unbuilt project for the Federal Reserve Bank Tower in New York [1969], you proposed lifting the building off the ground plane, in a way entirely removing its presence from the street while elevating its prominence on the skyline. How have you approached scale throughout your work, in particular reconciling the monumental with the day-to-day activities of the street?

KR Scale is a very elusive aspect of architecture and of course it relates to the particular nature, use, environment, and location of the building. Scale is something that was very well understood in Classical and Islamic architecture, and while it was fairly well understood in Revival it was always better understood in the original form.

I was fascinated in the mid-sixties by highway construction and by the Golden Gate Bridge—fabulous structure, great sense of scale, perhaps a bit overwhelming when you stand underneath the bridge. In terms of the modern aesthetic it is not so good, but in terms of an abstraction of scale it is absolutely fabulous. The highway engineers, in addition to solving the problem of getting from one place to another, stumbled into large scale by dealing with cost-effectiveness—how to make the longest span in the best possible way—and I found that very interesting as an accidental aspect of our environment which began to emerge after General Eisenhower committed the country to building the interstate highway system.

I use that analogy of the “highway scale” in a building such as the Ford Foundation, which has two different aspects to it from an urban design point of view. It has 42nd Street, which is a large-scale street, and then it has a medium-height residential area adjacent. I use that as a contrast in development to the idea of accommodating the individual. How do you deal with the individual, the one person who is committed to that boring day-in and-day out—working at a desk or now staring at a computer—how do you make something which accommodates the worker and gives a little aspect to his or her life?

We have done this in several different locations by introducing greenery, based on the old Jung theory that humans must connect to greenery or to nature. In the case of the Ford Foundation the site is an urban environment, so on one hand you say, “Let's get something that reminds people of the outside.” On the other hand you have this element of the larger scale that deals with the immediate environment and also makes the statement, “Hey! Here I am. This is me. I am the Ford Foundation. I am important.” This brings up an important aspect of monumental architecture. Why do we care about scale? Because it arrests us. It makes us stop. We look and we pay attention and the message is understood.

The same applies to the Knights of Columbus Headquarters in New Haven [1969]. The site is next to the

highway—the Oak Street Connector. Place yourself in that moment in time, in 1960 when Mayor Dick Lee was trying to revitalize the city. The site that we had was right on the edge of the Connector. The project needed to recognize that. And so this fairly strong set of four cylinders established an identity right there that you are now entering the city—this is the gate, this is the formal entry. Again the scale is modified as you look at it from the cylindrical towers to the smaller scale of sun-shading in the steel, to the multiple floors. The other aspect which I felt was very important was to keep the floors small so that there would be a fairly intimate relationship in the working environment, and there would be wonderful views all around.

P40 In the case of the Interstate Highway, you mentioned cost-effectiveness as one driving mechanism that can help steer the actual form or materials being employed. I wonder if you see anything today, in current work, which is a mechanism that architects like yourself or others are employing in their work to achieve large-scale projects.

KR That is a very good question. I guess probably Frank Gehry is a good example of a person dealing with very large-scale projects such as the Atlantic Yards development in Brooklyn. It is a very, very tough problem. How do you deal with the underlying drive to provide as much possible rental space—which is the reason the project is being built—and at the same time do that in a way that is sympathetic to the community, the urban design, and the humanist aspects of it. It will be interesting to see how that develops; it will be interesting to see how it will be experienced. Certainly he has shown his genius at providing these forms that become interesting.

It is another way of saying “Here I am.” When you see this distortion of the rectilinear form into something else, it immediately arrests your attention. It is not the same old cube. It is a twist of a cube, or a bent cube, or a broken cube, an exploded cube or something else and so your attention is immediately attracted to it. You never get the message across unless you wake people up. People don't see architecture. Most people are only peripherally aware of architecture. They don't see any of the details of architecture that we worry so much about. Their preoccupations generally are elsewhere.

P40 Do you think there has been a change over time in how buildings can say, “Here I am?”

KR Oh yes, and there are many, many ways it can be done. It is rather simplistic, but when you have a large building—and the building has a special relationship either to the environment or the city—you have to undertake some method for arresting people's attention, because otherwise it doesn't exist. It only exists when people see it, and this is as old as the profession of building itself. This goes back to when somebody first put one stone on top of two stones and then a king or prince or chieftain or a leader said, “I want more. I want something that expresses my God-like presence.”

P40 How do you make that transition from the first monumental gesture that arrests our attention, to more intimate details that relate to the scale of the occupant or user?

KR I like to start not with the person who is hiring us, but with the person who is intimately going to be using the building—in the case of an office building, the office worker. I

have interviewed thousands and thousands of office workers, laboriously asking them “What do you want? What do you see? What do you care about?” and it is a very humbling experience. I recommend it to you when you are practicing architecture to really talk and understand and listen, because we as architects tend not to. We tend to decide “This is what is going to be,” but we should never start that way. We should start with the person who has to use the building.

Next you must concern yourself with the person who is going to see the building but not use it, the passerby. Then you begin to consider why this is being built. If it is a purely commercial venture it's one thing. However, if it has a more elevated reason—let's say it's a public building of some sort, a museum or a temple or a church or a monument—then you begin to think of that. Moreover—of course that which we all strive for—is how to achieve the most lasting effect, not in the sense of being overwhelmed, but in the sense of creating an object of real beauty. That is where classical architecture had that great virtue and why it became so popular and why it so relevant even today.

P40 The prioritizing of the user brings to mind Eero Saarinen. Of course, we've heard the stories of when he was doing Dulles Airport in the late '50s, for example, and interviewing every worker about how much light they needed and other details ...

KR I certainly learned that from Eero. I had a brief encounter with Mies where I learned that there is a right and a wrong way, and the wrong way was any way other than his. But Eero didn't have a right and a wrong way. He had an almost research approach to his buildings.

P40 In your work how do the small-scale details fit into the large gesture? Is that a place where you can bring it down to the scale of the individual occupant?

KR Well that is an interesting point because when I started working in architectural offices in 1945 you pretty much had to invent everything from door handles, to door knobs, to hinges. There wasn't anything off-the-shelf. There was no such thing as a Sweet's catalog, for example. In the '60s when we were working on General Motors at Saarinen's office virtually everything was invented—the door pulls, everything. That is quite different now. A curtain wall for instance is really an off-the-shelf element. When you put stone cladding on a building it is an off-the-shelf element. Manufacturers come back with a video showing you how they are going to put on the rain screen and how they are going to do this and that, which 40 years ago you would have had to invent.

P40 One could argue that this is a good thing. Have we as architects lost anything as a result of these developments?

KR What is lost is the individual inventive aspect. What is gained, I suppose is some sort of universal experience, but again what is lost is that everything looks the same. But it is changing, these things gradually keep developing.

This is all by way of saying that the circumstances under which we practice are changing quite rapidly, and of course the use of the computer, which has allowed Frank Gehry and many other people to do what they do, could not have occurred forty years ago. I just happened to be flipping through a magazine this morning and someone was saying—maybe Thomas Mayne—that now with the computer every office has the

ability to make these odd-ball shapes, so to speak. It is no longer identified with the single creative individual, it is becoming universal.

There was once a time when an architect had a position in society and in the culture, where people recognized that the architect had a right to make decisions and could be relied on to produce a significant work of art. Nowadays you, as an architect, get pushed around by the client—very severely—as if you were a draftsman and didn't really have any particular skills. It is as if all you are bringing to the table is your ability to work on the computer, and the client is going to make the decisions for you. This is also driven by the commercialization of buildings being built for profit. When they are being built for profit, the person who is in charge of the profit aspect of the project is a controlling voice.

P40 You mentioned earlier some of the opportunities afforded to architects by the computer. Although, as you stated, there may be less autonomy for the architect given the relationship to the public and the client today, could you say that technology, on the other hand, may allow the architect to reclaim the master-builder role?

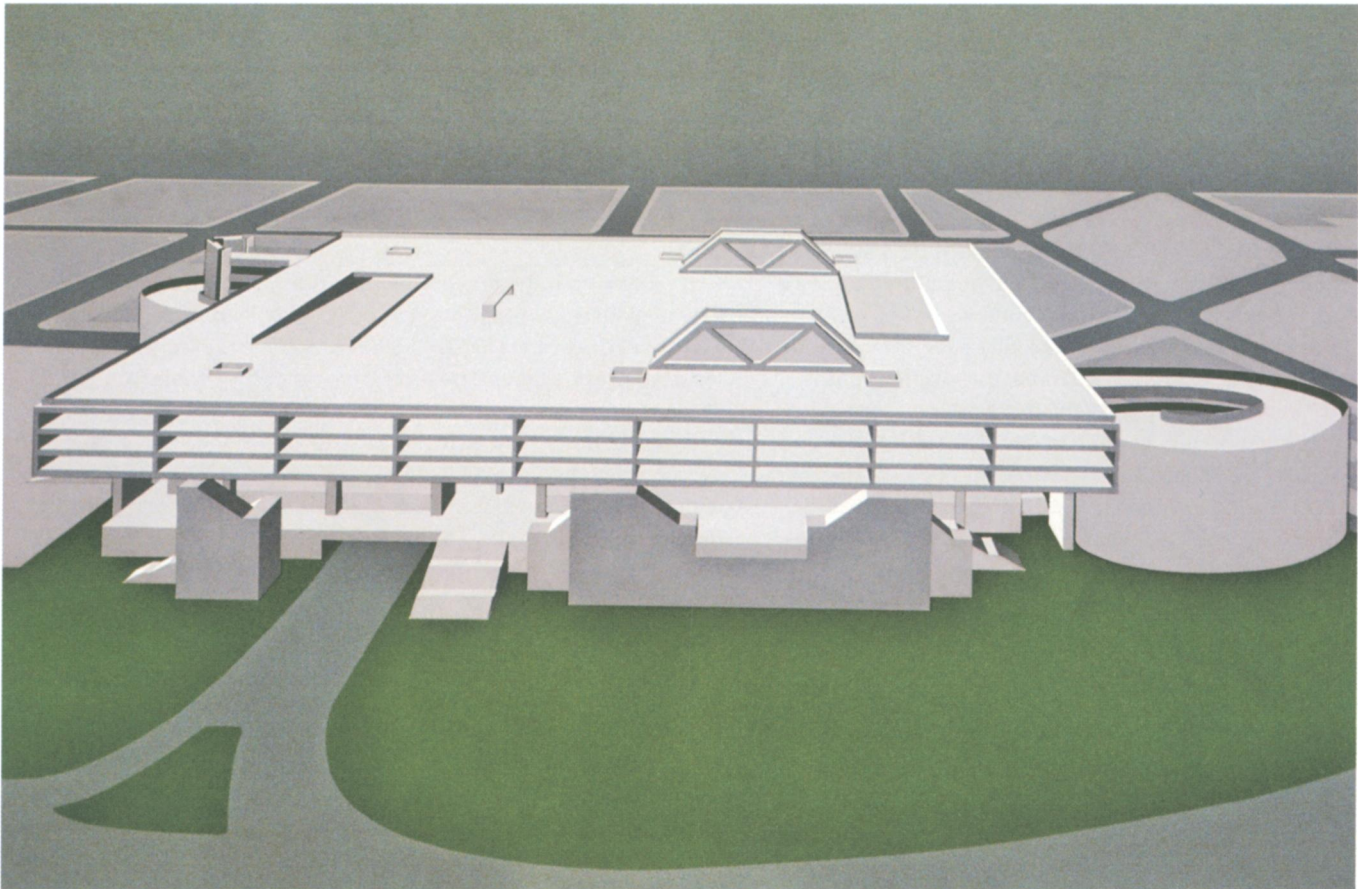
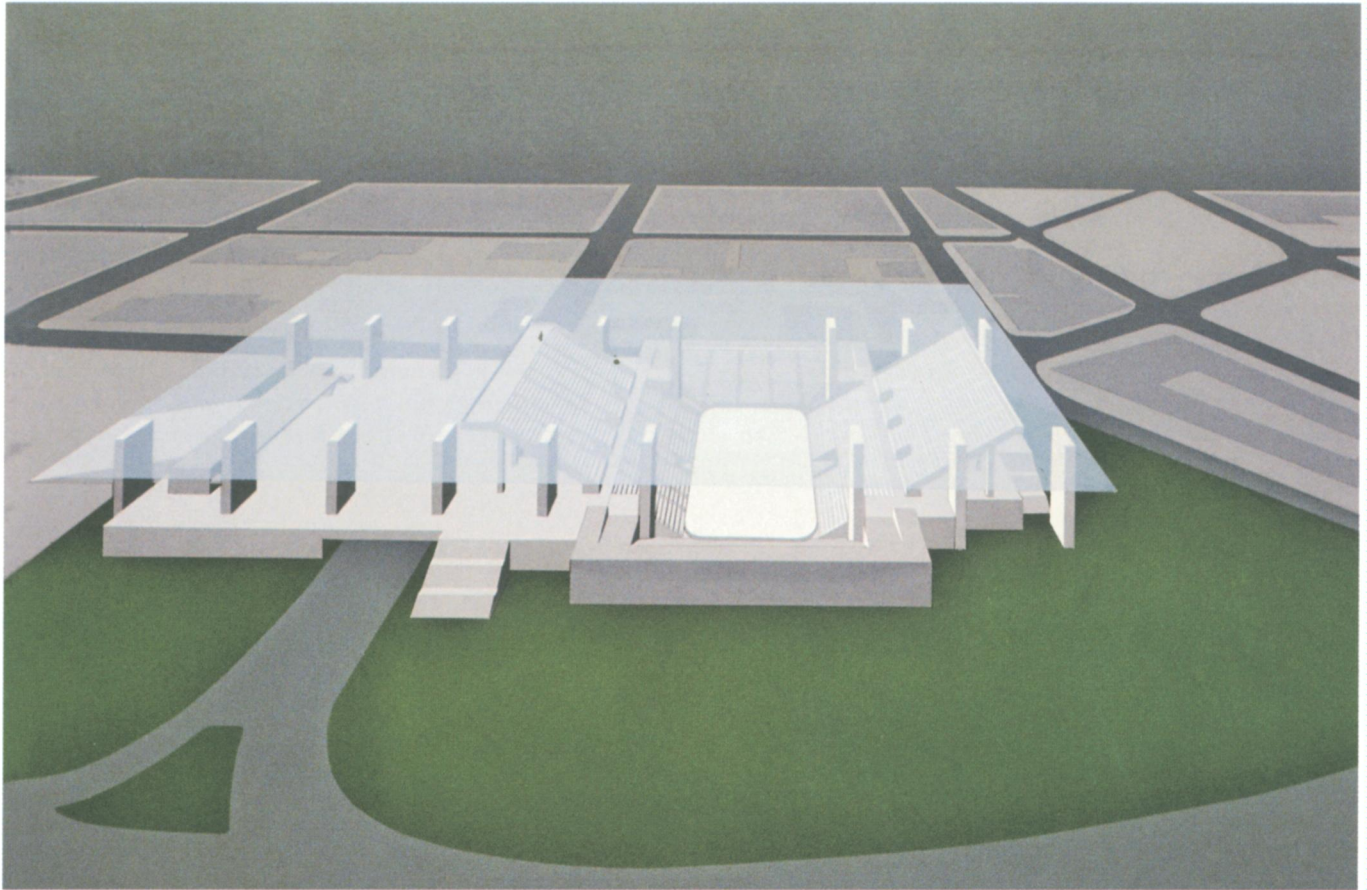
KR It will be very interesting to see what will happen 100 years from now. I think that there is going to be more of what you get in Japan for instance, where you have large construction / engineering/architectural firms with 3,000 employees and the architects are simply cogs in the wheel. They are not what you like to think of yourself as—an individual creator. They are simply cogs in that gigantic wheel which is serving the construction industry, and I think that is what is beginning to happen here.

All it will take will be for some of our large architecture firms to stop taking on construction management—which many of them have done already—and then to be bought out by a construction firm. That will give you a full-service entity, but that is a whole different profession from the typical architectural practice we have today. However, this is happening.

P40 Looking back on your work in the '60s and '70s with the City of New Haven—where you built the New Haven Veterans Memorial Coliseum [1972] and the Knights of Columbus Headquarters—do you believe projects of that scale could be realized in a place like New Haven today?

KR It would be very difficult today for a lot of reasons. The first is the reason that I just mentioned. The second reason has to do with the community. You could be building in the middle of nowhere and a community suddenly emerges out of the woods and begins to tell you what is wrong with you. And what is wrong with you is almost inevitable; it is never going to be about what is right with you. You, the architect, are always the wrong guy.

The participatory aspect of architecture—which I believe in and I encourage—is on the other hand a tremendous pain in the neck at times. You get people who have absolutely no idea what they are talking about ranting on and on and on. I'll give you an example. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York they desperately need space, but they have nowhere to expand. They can't go up, so in the American Wing courtyard—we are redoing that at the moment—we are excavating underneath the courtyard in order to provide about 10,000 square feet for desperately needed facilities and storage.



“The parking becomes a shelter, a universe, under which a whole variety of activities can take place.”



Millennia Singapore, 1994.



New Haven Veterans Memorial Coliseum, Arena Interior.



New Haven Veterans Memorial Coliseum, Model with Intended Exhibition Hall. (“Unfortunately, the other program elements such as exhibition space never materialized.”)

So at the Upper East Side Community Board hearing, I was making a presentation about this and a woman said to me, "You simply don't understand geometry." She said, "If you understood geometry, you would know that if you are building under the museum, you are building into Central Park." I wasn't able to make the connection myself, but she was able to make a very strong point of that, and it took about fifteen minutes to get through it all. That's a pretty good example of the kind of argument that you will get.

P40 And that didn't happen before?

KR No. It did when we designed the original master plan for the Metropolitan Museum of Art [1967].

P40 You worked with Mayor Dick Lee in New Haven during the '60s. What was he like as a client?

KR Dick was great. Wonderful, wide-ranging, fine mind and personality. Dick had a great vision for New Haven. Unfortunately, he retired before he succeeded in pulling it all together, and he was succeeded by a series of relatively less active governments. But he was a visionary.

P40 One of the major projects you designed for New Haven under the Lee administration—the Veterans Memorial Coliseum—was recently demolished. We certainly wouldn't be the first ones to say that this was a remarkable building. Could you perhaps tell us a bit about the project, and what led you to make the heroic gesture of elevating the parking so high into the air?

KR The technical problem we had with the Coliseum was that there was a high water level on the site; we couldn't put the parking underground, and I was concerned that if you put 2,400 cars underground it would be such a vast parking lot that nobody would use it because it would be too scary. The city wanted to keep Orange Street open, which divided the lot into two parts. A coliseum, which is going to have circuses, is going to have to deal with very large trucks which have to be driven onto the floor. Elephants have to be taken to that level. It was important to get the floor of the ice rink at grade level. Parking couldn't go underneath. If it couldn't go on grade, the next logical thing was to put all parking on the top. In my mind this would remove it. It doesn't visually remove the parking, but it removes it from the activity along the street. The parking becomes a shelter, a universe, under which a whole variety of activities can take place. Unfortunately, the other program elements such as exhibition space never materialized, partly because Dick retired in the middle of the whole project, partly because it was one million dollars over budget, partly because the succeeding administrations really just didn't have the stomach for it, and partly because—although the arena had a few years of pretty good success bringing in events—the Coliseum faced new competition with the opening of the Foxwoods [1986] and Mohegan Sun [1996] Casinos. At the casinos there are events going on every night to which they practically give away the tickets. What group of dentists, for example, wants to have a convention in New Haven at the Coliseum when they could go to Foxwoods or Mohegan Sun and see all of the other entertainment?

And so the convention market disappeared, and the local hockey team didn't make it, and there were no sports. So the Coliseum got off to a bad start. Then, of course, the

exhibition part of it was never built ... so the combination of all of these elements made it pretty much inevitable that a coliseum would not work in New Haven.

P40 When we look at the Coliseum, we can't help recalling El Lissitzky's Cloud-hangers, or perhaps Yona Friedman's Superstructure drawings ...

KR Superstructures were in the air at that time, but I wasn't thinking of that. I was really thinking of the project one small step at a time, and going forward with the process.

P40 Almost like the research method you were talking about with Saarinen?

KR Right. Exactly. Where else are you going to put it? And how do you do that? And parking lots are 62 feet wide and you put a truss every 62 feet ... Of course, you have to have a pre-disposition to do a monumental building as well.

P40 So in your process, do you sketch out the initial monumental idea, establish what that is going to be, and then step back?

KR No, I never do that, because if you do that you lose the opportunity to find out where you are going. It is much more interesting ... the way you start on this little journey, you push yourself forward, and things suddenly start to appear and begin to emerge and the light comes on at a certain point.

I got the idea for the Ford Foundation as I was crossing the Quinnipiac Bridge one morning because we lived in Guilford at the time. I remember exactly the moment on the bridge when it suddenly occurred to me to wrap the building around and make the atrium. Prior to that we had done a lot of legwork, a lot of research. There is just a moment when it all comes together.

P40 We'd like to talk to you about some of your work in Asia, in particular the Millennia complex in Singapore [1994].

KR Well, it is two office buildings and a hotel. There was an opportunity to do something that would be a statement when you come from the airport that would say, "Now, this is Singapore."

With the hotel we decided several things. We decided first of all that we were going to put the bathrooms on the outside wall. You can have a room and a bathroom beside it, both with windows. Now this was a radical departure for hotel design; the bathroom has an octagonal window so that visitors can see the central city framed through an octagonal opening. And in the bedroom/living room area there is a rectangular window with an awning—both buildings have awnings on them, because Singapore is on the equator, and a relatively small awning gives you shaded windows.

The massing of the building is a slab. I felt that if you put a slab on the ground, then when you approach the site on the highway all you will see is the hotel. If the hotel is raised up 90 feet in the air—a little bit of a memory to the Federal Reserve building—it is possible to see the Central Business District.

Then with the two office buildings, the first was rotated so that it related to the CBD. I put it up on four big columns to get it up in the air and have a public space underneath, making it part of the plaza. The other building was determined by the way the boulevard curves around.

So all three buildings—the hotel and the two office buildings—are responding specifically to that site and the geometry of the site. The first office building was rotated in such a way that it was on axis with the arrival from the airport and illuminated at the top so that it can be seen from quite a distance. It serves as an announcement to the city ... a little bit like the Knights of Columbus Headquarters in New Haven.

P40 Have you found that it is easier to think big in places like Singapore? How does it compare to working in the United States, for example?

KR Not particularly. I must say there seems to be a general problem of clients becoming more bureaucratic. It used to be that one could deal with a single responsible person, but this appears to have morphed into large groups with very disparate ideas as to what should be done.

P40 For better or for worse, the heroic building and urban renewal decades of the '50s and '60s in the United States demonstrated a popular willingness to think big. Are we simply afraid of that now?

KR I think that Ground Zero is a good example of what we cannot do. We seem incapable of rebuilding there. It's been five years this November [2006] and nothing has really happened ... it is this constant manipulation and negotiation. Now, New York is a complex city to build in during the best of times, but I don't think it would be any different at any other major urban center. No matter how much will there is, there still must be the authorization and ability to do it. But somehow we don't seem to have that at the moment, and part of it is the participatory nature again, for whatever reason, of the people who feel intimately involved with 9/11, part of it is the complexity of the city government, part of it is the whole nature of politics which is really not dedicated towards the best in building.

P40 Coming back to New Haven, how was the city different under Mayor Dick Lee?

KR That was a different time because Dick was committed to doing something, and he had connections in Washington. New Haven was one of the premier cities with regards to government plans for urban renewal. Looking back, there were some good things that happened and others not so good. But it is always easy to criticize after the fact. Too often today we criticize before the fact.

You have to destroy something to build something in any urban environment. I will be curious to see if New Haven can pull something off on the Coliseum site. How long will it take to actually realize something there? There has been a lot of talk for the last couple of years, but it will be interesting to see how much can be done.

I gave a lecture series once in Sweden, and they took me to various places in Stockholm to show me new developments. The interesting thing was that the architects who were showing me around weren't living in any of these developments. They were all living someplace else. I think there is a little lesson in that. The architects prefer to live in the old city with attractive, quirky spaces. That is more attractive than the rational world of development. What grows naturally is perhaps richer, in the final analysis, than anything that can be suddenly imposed.

P40 In the end, is it possible for a large, monumental building—such as some you have designed throughout your career—to reconcile with the life of the neighborhood and the street?

KR Well it depends on the particulars. I can say yes and no. In Europe a large church, for instance, can—and has—developed entire cities and towns around it. But that is because the whole civilization of that town was focused on that church. If today the alternative to the church or the temple is the shopping center ... well, the difference with the shopping center is that the people are driving from wherever they live. The act of driving has eliminated the city in that context.

The fact that you are driving means that you don't necessarily want to live where you work, or want to shop where you work, or want to do anything else where you work, because you have all of this imagined freedom to bridge. You can go anywhere at anytime. I go to New York two or three times a week, and I used to be able to drive from here to midtown Manhattan in eighty minutes. Now it can be up to three hours, and that is in a matter of twenty years.

The only answer is to probably revert back to where communities are pedestrian, and New York is an interesting example, because it could easily be a pedestrian city. If you live there for a little bit you think, "what the hell are all of these cars doing?" You can get around. It has perfect subway, bus and pedestrian movement, and you have a very large population. New York in my mind is one of the great urban lessons, central Manhattan is what I am talking about, largely because of the river. This lesson hasn't been learned in any other city.

Urban sprawl is endemic to every large city anywhere in the world. It is a frightful problem. When I went to Beijing for the first time in 1973 or so, there were no cars. Everyone was on bicycles, and all of the city was essentially one and two stories. Twenty years later you have high-rises, Mercedes, traffic jams, and you can see the old city in the first stages of being destroyed by a new city. I suppose this has to go through a cycle, and I'm not sure where it is going to end up later on, but it is a very interesting subject to try to fathom ... where are we actually going with all of this? What role can/might the architect be able to play in this? That said, I don't think that we architects should delude ourselves. Unless we become politically active, we can never affect this in any way. I wish I could have ended on a more optimistic note.