

Kevin Roche in conversation with Thomas Weaver



The architect Kevin Roche is 93 years old and still going strong. When I first emailed to ask if he'd be interested in this conversation he shot back a reply within a few minutes, inviting me over to his office in Hamden, Connecticut, where he still works four days a week. A couple of months later, when I arrived in Hamden, he was there to greet me, and over the next five hours he talked non-stop, recounting stories from his childhood, his education in Dublin and with Mies in Chicago, and even restaging the original slideshows from a number of his most celebrated projects, all delivered in his mellifluous brogue.

With Roche you don't need to dig very deep to uncover an archaeology of modern architecture because it is right there in front of you. His office is the latest successor to the US practice first set up in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan in 1923 by the Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. When Eliel retired the office was split between his partners; one half went to his daughter Pipsan and her husband Robert Swanson, the other to his son Eero. From 1950 Eero Saarinen & Associates became perhaps the most famous

architectural studio in the world, or certainly the most productive, turning out a succession of great buildings, including the General Motors Technical Centre in nearby Warren, Michigan, the TWA Flight Centre in New York and Dulles International Airport in Washington, DC. Eero's assistant on all of these projects was Kevin Roche, and when Saarinen died suddenly in 1961 it seemed only fitting that the work of the firm would be continued from its new home in Connecticut by his deputies, Roche and John Dinkeloo. Between 1961 and 1966 the two men oversaw the construction of all the projects initiated by Saarinen, including the Gateway Arch in St Louis, the CBS Building in New York and the John Deere HQ in Moline, Illinois, only retitling the office under their own names when they were done. The work continued and the practice flourished, quickly establishing its own identity with ground-breaking buildings such as the Oakland Museum, Ford Foundation in New York and Fine Arts Centre at Amherst. Dinkeloo

Kevin Roche inside a model
of the Ford Foundation HQ, c 1964

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died in 1981 but, loyal to his partner, Roche kept the office name, and under the acronym KRJDA it continues to this day, completing projects the world over.

At the centre of this lineage is Roche himself, who over 70 years of practice has pioneered so many of the things architecture now takes for granted, as much as he has reinvented what it actually means to be an architect, devolving the image of the practitioner as artful casuist in favour of the architect as communicator and problem-solver. And amazingly he is still working. Halfway through our conversation, when Roche's assistant asked if I'd like some lunch, I replied that I'd eat whatever Kevin was having, thinking that this perhaps was the elixir of his eternal youthfulness. It turns out that if you want to live a long and distinguished life, still happily working in your nineties and able to talk engagingly about any number of subjects, this is what you eat: a toasted ham and cheese sandwich with mayonnaise, a plate of ruffled crisps, another of chocolate chip cookies and a very large glass of Sprite.—Thomas Weaver

TW Kevin, in preparation for this talk I was reading the big *Shaping the Future* book on Eero Saarinen, published a few years ago, in particular the transcript of an event at Yale in which all the great and the good were offering rather grandiose appraisals of Saarinen's legacy – architects like Stern, Pelli, Venturi, etc. When it came to your turn to speak you prefaced your remarks with an eloquent kind of apologia in which you quoted the famous passage from St Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, saying that in trying to see what we venerate we look 'through a glass, darkly'. You used this sermon to suggest that we have to be careful in looking at the past, mindful of the circumstances of the culture of a specific period. I am keen to employ the same qualification, so that we talk about your past through the context of your time – if only because your time is so long – more than 90 years, 70 of them as a practising architect, extending from the 1920s through to today. And I guess, in beginning, one of the most obvious contextual things to point out is that although you are celebrated as one of the most influential American architects of the second half of the twentieth century, you are in fact Irish.

KR I am. I was born over a shop owned by my aunt in Lower Camden Street in Dublin on 22 June 1922. At that time my mother was destitute because my father Eamonn was in jail. He had been arrested and imprisoned during the Irish War of Independence because he was a member of the IRA. Along with other Irish prisoners he went on a hunger strike. When he was released in 1920 he became a member of parliament in the Irish Free State, but soon afterwards, during the Irish Civil War, he was captured and imprisoned again for a couple of years, this time in Limerick. When he was eventually released he was offered a position as manager of a small creamery in Mitchelstown, County Cork, the heart of Ireland's dairy region. My father was an absolutely incredible man. He had never been to school but he had a great mind, and could solve arithmetic problems so fast it was unbelievable. This helped him to become very successful. Some short while later he took over a rival creamery, and within a few more years he had built it up into this huge institution – Mitchelstown Co-op Creameries – employing hundreds of people. They would make butter, buttermilk, cream, things like that. He sent these products to my aunt in Dublin who would sell them in her shop, and within a short while she, too, became very successful, operating more than 25 other branches and several restaurants. She bought an enormous estate called Burton Hall outside Dublin where she and her eight children lived, surrounded by a team of gardeners, cooks, an upstairs maid, a downstairs maid, racehorses in nearby stables and a chauffeur called Eddie Keogh. He drove the identical car to King George V –

a huge Daimler – and wore leather leggings and gloves and a peaked cap. Whenever my aunt walked towards the car Eddie would jump up and salute her.

TW Did your father indulge in the same trappings of wealth and upward social mobility?

KR No, but we did live in a rather grand house called Gardenhurst in Mitchelstown, at the entrance to the old castle, with an acre of beautiful garden surrounded by a 14-foot-high stone wall, but really we lived quite modestly, and my father was much more interested in building up the business than luxuriating in his wealth.

TW And he didn't keep up his political activities?

KR God no. After two stints in prison he said to hell with that and abandoned politics altogether. He was much more interested in butter and cream, and then cheese. He used to travel all over Europe, often by airplane on the very first Aer Lingus flights, establishing contacts. On one of these trips he befriended a Swiss man called Dr Winternitz, who lived with us for a while because there were no hotels in Mitchelstown, and who helped my father develop his cheese-making. Every night before bed my brothers and I would say the rosary. But before this we would all play poker with Dr Winternitz – when he lost a hand he used to shout out in his thick Swiss accent that he had been 'Schwindled!' When the cheese also proved a great success my father was again very clever, because he exploited a by-product of its manufacture – whey – which he discovered he could feed to pigs. Before long he had several thousand pigs, and their own manure and by-products were in turn used to enrich vast acres of local farmland to grow wheat. So the whole thing became a big, almost industrial, agricultural setup. After my father died the creamery was eventually bought by Kerrygold.

TW How did this emerging industry, right on your doorstep, impact on you?

KR My father was keen for me to involve myself with everything, and so by the time I was 13 or 14, every day after school I would work as an apprentice to a local mason or carpenter based in the big metal-welding workshop and sawmill my father had set up among the farm and creamery buildings. Soon he even gave me a commission of my own, to design a cheese warehouse, and I also helped supervise its construction. I must have been about 17 years old at the time. The following year I designed and built another building on the compound, the piggery. At that stage I was in my final year at boarding school – Rockwell College in Cashel, County Tipperary – although I must admit that I was pretty much the worst student ever, certainly earlier when I was at the Christian Brothers' School in Mitchelstown. Consistently bottom of the class. There was no

subject I didn't fail. Mitchelstown at the time had a village idiot called Patsy Murphy who always used to walk around pulling a little toy train behind him. The hierarchy at school was honours students, passed students, failed students, then Patsy, and finally at the bottom of them all, Kevin Roche.

TW But when did you get cleverer? Or when – and this doesn't necessarily follow – did you develop an interest in architecture?

KR At Rockwell, after study, we would have an hour or so to ourselves to do our own reading and follow our curiosity. I remember suddenly thinking that I'd like to design a church. Sketching this out I had, what I thought, was a stunning epiphany, imagining a church in the shape of a cross. I was incredibly impressed with myself – I thought it was a brilliant, genius innovation – and showed it to a friend that night in the dormitory. 'You feckin eejit', he said, 'don't you know all churches are in the shape of a cross'. It was the most disappointing moment of my life. Anyway, this is how stupid I was. But it was at Rockwell that I came across Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* in the school library. Not that I could understand a word of it, of course. Have you ever tried reading it?

TW It's not the easiest read.

KR You're telling me. But nevertheless I was interested in it.

TW But what did you understand architecture to be? I mean, there can't have been many architects in Mitchelstown in the 1930s.

KR Well, you know, the English had left a residue of fairly interesting buildings. King's Square, where we lived, was one of them – a rather good quality Georgian square, with Protestants living in the lower half, Catholics in the upper. The whole of the town itself was similarly orderly, located on the Cork to Dublin road, with a market square in the centre; on axis with this to the north was the Catholic church, and on the same axis to the south, the Protestant church. So there had been a bit of planning. But really, I have no idea where my interest in architecture came from. Perhaps more from the warehouse and piggery I designed for my father than anything else.

TW Didn't he want you to take over the family business?

KR Oh no, nothing like that. Besides, my eldest brother, who studied law, was working with him, handling all the legal affairs of the business. After Rockwell, in 1940, I remember going to see him and telling him I wanted to be an architect. My father, to his credit, just went along with this. A few weeks later we walked down an administrative corridor in University College Dublin towards a little office, where my father put down a £20 note and announced 'My son here wants to study architecture'. The woman behind the desk said 'Okay'. That was

the extent of the application process. Back then the school was located in a kind of mock cathedral built in the nineteenth century, and I just remember it being full of sand, because they were filling hundreds of sacks in anticipation of German air raids. In the upper portion of the main space were two balconies, one of which was where the drafting tables were arranged. We'd be constantly having to brush the sand off our drawings. The professor at the school was Rudolf Maximilian Butler, an ecclesiastical architect and scholar. Very strongly Beaux-Arts. He wouldn't brook anything that wasn't Greek Revival. On our first day I remember standing in his office with the other ten students that year – interestingly, five of them were girls, which was very enlightened for the time – listening to Butler cryptically declare 'There are no plums in architecture'. 'Well, thanks a lot', we thought, and all trooped back to our desks. That first year we just drew classical columns. Copying mostly. Lots and lots of columns. Then after a year we moved on to arches. It was all very strictly supervised. But in my second or third year Butler died, and the school was taken over by a practising architect, who dropped the whole Beaux-Arts thing. The first project he set for us was the design of a house. Mine had a spiral staircase in the middle – as with the church cruciform plan, I thought I'd invented something totally original. After I presented my drawings my tutor took one look at them and said, 'You'll never get a coffin down those stairs, Roche'.

TW It's also quite pragmatic. I mean, he's right. At a certain point in any house you do have to get a coffin in and out. This I suppose is also the ultimate Modulor – not the human figure alive and vertical but dead and horizontal.

KR That's the Irish Modulor. We certainly weren't exposed to the Continental version. We were vaguely aware that there was a guy called Le Corbusier, but it wasn't until my final year that we started seeing any of his buildings. I actually based part of my thesis project – a house for the Taoiseach – on the curved wall at the entrance to the Swiss Pavilion. Of course, I was still an idiot at that stage but I did come top of the class.

TW What did you do after graduation?

KR Immediately afterwards I went to work for the architect Michael Scott. He was a really interesting figure. He hadn't had a formal architectural education but had been an actor with the Abbey School of Drama while doing a pupillage with a Dublin firm. He was wonderful. Really charismatic. It was a small office at the time but it attracted some of the brightest young designers around – people like Patrick Scott, who became a well-known painter, Kevin Fox, Wilfred Cantwell and Robin Walker, who was a good friend. Michael gave us all quite a bit of freedom. At one point I was

designing an apartment block and I had the idea of prefabricating the apartments and stacking them on top of each other. I built a model of the scheme. I remember one morning a man called Ove Arup came by the office – he was working on his own then, long before his firm was set up, and was the engineer on Michael's Busáras bus station. I showed him the model, but he just looked at it dispassionately and said it would never work. I insisted it would and argued my case, until finally Ove picked up the model and stood on it. 'You see', he said, crushing it, 'the problem is that it has no lateral strength'. That was my masterclass in engineering.

TW Why didn't you stay longer with Michael Scott?

KR I was feeling restless and wanted to see more of the world. Because of the war, I was also feeling a complete sense of isolation. I had no idea what was happening in Europe. I mean, I only heard about the D-Day landings as I was going into an engineering exam at UCD. The rest of the world was completely wrapped up in this madness and I was sitting there taking a stupid exam. I felt so out of it. But anyway, Michael understood my impulse to escape and helped me secure a position with Maxwell Fry – the leading architect in London at that time. I moved there the following year, in 1946. There were only five other people there at the time, a young woman and four ex-RAF pilots. Max put me to work designing simple little huts in Accra, West Africa. We all had to do our own engineering, and despite Ove's earlier instruction, I really knew nothing and so just covered my drawings in fake calculations and random numbers because I knew that Max checked every drawing each night – this is just to give you an inroad into my character at the time. Despite my idiocy, the others in the office were all very kind and generous to me. I remember when one of them had a birthday we made a little collection and pooled a couple of pounds between us. Through a mutual friend we contacted Henry Moore and went to visit him in his one-room London apartment. He sold us one of his drawings, which we gave to our colleague as a present. It must be worth about \$50,000 now.

TW Did you like London?

KR I loved it. But remember in 1946 there was rubble everywhere. It was shattering really. Whole areas were totally destroyed. Food was also in short supply. I was hungry most of the time I was there. For lunch we would walk around the corner from Max's office, and at

*Clockwise from top left:
Kevin and his sister Lily,
the family home in Mitchelstown,
with his brothers, the local train
service, c 1939 and with his mother
Courtesy Kevin Roche*

a small window hatch next to a restaurant we would hand over two and sixpence and in return get a little paper plate with something barely edible. But still it was a great experience. With another friend from Michael Scott's office I travelled around looking at buildings: Oxford and Cambridge, where we were arrested for sleeping on one of the college cricket pitches – to two Irish vagrants, such as we were, it just seemed like the nicest, flattest piece of grass on which to spend the night. We didn't realise it was sacred. We were mostly looking at the churches and cathedrals. English modernism was very dull in comparison. With my father's help we also flew over to Paris to see some of the modern European buildings, and from there went on to Switzerland and northern Italy. Milan was even more devastated than London. But where we really saw the best modern architecture was in the magazines, especially *The Architectural Review*, which the office subscribed to. I remember one issue in particular praising the work of Mies van der Rohe, who I'd never heard of before. Some months earlier I had written to the offices of Le Corbusier, Aalto, Sven Markelius and a few others, without much luck, but after seeing those photographs I thought to myself that I had to get over to the US to study with Mies.

TW So that's what you did?

KR In 1947 my friend Fred Hilton and I were accepted into IIT's masters programme and we left the following year. I took two bags with me – in one was my underwear, in the other was my collection of nineteenth-century poetry and all of Joyce's work. I still have the first editions. At one stage I had aspirations to be a poet. Even earlier I wanted to be a dress designer – you can imagine what people in a small town in Ireland thought about that. Anyway, getting to Chicago from Dublin in 1948 wasn't easy. We first had to fly to Shannon airport, and then get on another flight to Gander airport in Newfoundland. From there we changed planes again and went to Boston, and then caught a flight to Idlewild in New York, which in those days was just a handful of shacks. From New York we had to fly to Toledo before finally going on to Chicago. It took days. I remember we arrived at 2am, caught a bus to 33rd Street in south Chicago, which was a very tough neighbourhood.

TW But I read somewhere that you had also applied to other US architecture schools.

KR That's true. Together with IIT, I applied to Harvard, where Gropius was teaching, and Yale, and, incredibly, got accepted by all three. But in the end I chose IIT because Mies seemed like the man. The school was very small at that time, and the campus had yet to be completed. Crown Hall wasn't finished until the mid-1950s and so we worked out of the engineering faculty. As a graduate student I was with ten





others, all foreigners, and each from a different country – England, France, Switzerland, even Egypt. Personally, I never really presented myself as Irish – I mean, I never went around wearing green things or celebrating St Patrick’s Day or anything like that. I much preferred to think of myself as a citizen of the world. Once we were there the one lesson you learned in the studios was that you had to have a brush to clean your drawings, but in Chicago the detritus wasn’t sand but soot. The whole city was so polluted. For our first design project we had to design a house. I remember it was snowing hard and so I thought why the hell would you design a flat roof, and not do what the Scandinavians do, and create a pitched roof. Mies took one look at my drawings and said, ‘You could do dat, but I would not do dat, you know’. That was the beginning and end of my education from Mies.

TW Did Mies run the school as if it was an office?

KR He had three or four assistants with him who would patrol the place. It was all rather strict. I must say I was really quite disappointed with the school. The undergraduates, for example, just seemed to spend all their time drawing bricks, constantly trying to figure out how many bricks you could get between two evenly spaced steel columns. There was no such thing as trying to understand concepts or designing forms. It was all about making very elemental things fit. And so after one semester I left. I had seen reports of the new buildings being designed for the UN in Manhattan, and these seemed so much more exciting. At the same time I was running out of money. So I got on a bus and went to New York. After two days in the city I went to see Wallace Harrison and begged his office manager to give me a job. He hired me, but only as a file clerk. After two months I then managed to get onto the drafting team, earning \$1.50 per hour, \$60 per week, which seemed like a fortune at the time.

TW Where were you living?

KR I rented a little studio apartment in a fifth-floor walk-up on 67th Street. After work I used to go to a little place I knew where you could get a meal for 20 cents and then I’d just walk all over the city. One evening, letting my inner fashion designer come out, I was looking at dresses in a storefront on Madison Avenue.

As I was standing there I saw Joe DiMaggio behind me in the reflection of the glass. He called out to a woman nearby, ‘Would you get your ass over here!’ Marilyn Monroe then wiggled her way up and the three of us looked at the dresses together. At the time it felt like the most amazing experience of my life. I thought I’d really arrived.

TW Other than the UN, what was happening architecturally in the city at that time? The Guggenheim and Seagram buildings had yet to be built, but there must have been other things to see.

KR Bunshaft’s Lever House was under construction and of course there was the original MOMA building by Edward Durrell Stone. I virtually lived at MOMA during my days off. It’s wonderful when you are by yourself and



have no responsibilities, you can just see what you want to see. In this sense I had a great education in New York. There was also a cousin of mine, Kathleen, who would often visit and who I’d go out with in the evenings. She was an actress contracted to MGM and made a few movies, one of them playing opposite James Mason. It was actually Kathleen who helped me find my next job. I had left Harrison’s office because they fired me after I’d flown home briefly to visit my parents; they said I hadn’t told them about the trip. I tried every office I could think of to get another job. I remember

Opposite, clockwise, from top left:
Kevin’s first motorbike, making a model airplane, as a student at Rockwell College and the piggery he designed and built at his father’s creamery
Courtesy Kevin Roche
Above: Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche, c 1953
© Balthazar Korab /
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC

going to see Marcel Breuer, who was very sweet – he said I was interested in all the same architects he was – but he didn’t have any work. I finally got a position with Anthony J DePace, who had a small office in the garment district. He did lots of gothic revival churches and a few days after I started he asked me to design an altar for one of his commissions. And so I sat down and started sketching. Two hours later he yelled at me, ‘You got them drawings yet, Roche?’ I soon realised that DePace was not the office for me. But then through a friend at the UN I heard that Eero Saarinen was coming to town and that he was looking for people. I managed to get an appointment to see him at 8am. He was staying at the Plaza Hotel. I had been up all the previous night, hitting the

town, going to the Stork Club and every place you could imagine, and so when I showed up at Eero’s room I was dead on my feet. He sat me down on the edge of the bed, and talked to me from his dressing room as he got himself ready. He ... had ... this ... very ... slow ... way ... of ... speaking, and I just fell asleep. Luckily he didn’t notice. When I woke up I gave him a real *spiel* about my experiences and interests and he said, ‘Okay, why don’t you come out to Michigan’.

TW If only all job interviews were like that.

KR But initially I wasn’t so excited. Michigan seemed like the end of the earth, and I must admit I also didn’t have much regard for the work of Eero’s father – Eliel. He had done a kind of fake monumental thing at Cranbrook which I really didn’t like, and Eero himself, who was only about 40 years old, hadn’t done much of his own. But anyway, I borrowed some money and caught the train to Detroit and then a bus to Bloomfield Hills. The office was located at a desolate intersection and was shared with his brother-in-law Robert Swanson, who Eero really disliked and wouldn’t talk to. Eero’s half of the office was tiny. There was only a handful of staff. I started right there and then. Somebody helped me find a place to live – a rented room in the house of Mrs Looney on Purdy Street – at \$7 a week paid promptly on Saturday morning.

TW Within a relatively short space of time, however, what at first felt like the middle of nowhere turned out to be an incredibly rich and interesting place to be, not least in the world of design.



KR Detroit in 1950 was an extraordinary city. All of the design world suddenly seemed to be focused there. Part of this, of course, was a result of the automobile industry, with all the major motor manufacturers based there. Industry was right on our doorstep. It was also in this period that the head of design at General Motors – Harley Earl, who was crazy but an absolutely wonderful guy – introduced the idea of changing the style of each model every year. This is how they sold their cars – through their newness as well as their style. Design therefore became fundamental to GM's business strategy. And its importance soon permeated everything. This explains the emergence of people like Charles Eames and George Nelson, or design schools like the nearby Cranbrook Academy of Art. And of course there were architects like Eliel and Eero. All of these people were in Michigan. And so very soon after I'd arrived in Bloomfield Hills I thought of New York as past it. You'd also never want to go to California. Detroit was the cutting edge and the place to be. This was immediately made clear to me when the first job I was assigned at Saarinen's was the General Motors Technical Centre.

TW *How was it that an architect who had built so little and who was then still relatively young got what turned out to be America's richest architectural commission?*

KR Well, his father got the job. After working on the masterplan Eliel – who was very well established – passed it on to his son. I was given the task of working on the research centre. In the lobby I finally got to design a spiral staircase and that somehow put me in Eero's consciousness. A short while later he had to give a presentation for Brandeis and he asked me to do some drawings. I was a terrible renderer and just did some scribbles, which were quickly rolled up and given to him. When Eero unrolled them on the train on the way to the meeting he was so horrified he had to redo them all himself. The next day he said to Joe Lacy, the office manager, 'fire that guy'. He

soon recanted, but I was really in the doghouse for a while.

TW *But within the next two or three years you climbed your way back, promoted to principal design associate and Saarinen's main assistant in 1954.*

KR I think he took a shine to me because, like him, I was from a small country and we would often talk about our shared backgrounds. I also had all these theories about architecture – which of course were all nonsense – but Eero seemed to enjoy listening to them. At the same time, Charles Eames had seen the completed lobby at the research centre and was especially taken by an impressed plywood ceiling I had designed.

that he would frequently consult on various projects. The first time I really collaborated with him was on a film he was preparing. He was especially interested in the Northland shopping centre in Detroit, one of the very first large-scale shopping centres in the US, designed by Victor Gruen, and so with a crew of people from the office we went down there and took about 300 photographs. Charles then collaged these into his presentation, and some of them later appeared in his *Glimpses of the USA* film shown in the first USSR-USA cultural exchange in Moscow in 1959. Again, that helped me work my way up. But really, I wasn't only ambitious to get closer to Eero. I just enjoyed the work.

TW *It also seems to me that you were confident. Despite your self-proclaimed idiocy, right from your childhood you appear confident about the things you were thinking – even if some of these things, like the cruciform plan and spiral stair – unbeknownst to you – had been considered before. Going all the way from Mitchelstown to Chicago to study with Mies and then only staying one semester also seems to suggest a certain self-assurance.*

KR I guess so. But it was only in the mid-1950s, after a few years



He told Eero how much he liked it and so my stock rose. He was a good friend and influence on Eero, even if they were sometimes rivals, especially when it came to their furniture designs.

TW *Was that your first encounter with Eames?*

KR Charles would often pass through the office – he had earlier taught at Cranbrook at the invitation of Eliel, and even after he moved to California his friendship with Eero meant

*Opposite: Eero Saarinen & Associates, General Motors Technical Centre, 1950–56
© Balthazar Korab / Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC
Above: Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche, spiral staircase, General Motors Technical Centre, 1956*

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with Eero, that I felt I knew what I was doing. It was also then that I started travelling with him. When he pitched for a job or met clients or saw the site he always liked to have someone to talk to immediately afterwards about the experience and to think through the first design ideas. I was that person. We flew everywhere. For example, it was during one trip to San Francisco that we first thought of developing some kind of loader that would take passengers straight from the plane to the terminal building – even if the terminal building then was only a shack. All airports at that time just had steps, so you'd walk down from the plane onto the tarmac. We then refined these loaders or platforms and integrated them into the design of the TWA terminal.

TW *I didn't realise until speaking with you today that the evolution of the aviation industry is a constant, parallel, thread through your whole life and career – going right back to the way your father endorsed the fledgling Aer Lingus airline for his own trips around Europe. The plane, much more than the car or the train, seems to be your definitive mode of transport.*

KR I think that's right. The first ten years I worked with Eero, from 1950 to 1960, was when the twentieth century was really gathering speed. And the airplane was central to that. For Dulles I went to all the meetings right from the word go. We looked at every possible airport we could see. Eero was not intimidated by what other people were doing, and so we spoke with Minoru Yamasaki and visited his own airport at St Louis. There's also all those famous stories of Eero sending out teams of people with stopwatches to record everything – when planes take off and land and the flow of passengers. He was obsessed by research. We felt we had to be as prepared as possible because Dulles was going to be the first airport designed with jet aircraft in mind. During its design the FAA even flew us out to Seattle to visit Boeing and join a test flight of a prototype of the 707, the first commercial jet airliner. I remember as we nervously waited to board, the pilot came out onto the tarmac and kicked the tyres – it was just his way of reassuring us.

TW *It's interesting that you frame all this work as 'research'. This is a massively overused and misused term now, and one that seems forced on any intellectual exercise, no matter how insignificant; but as you describe these processes, research really is the right way of characterising these activities. Your architectural ideas didn't simply emerge out of invention, but involved a huge amount of information gathering.*

KR Research is an essential part of the design process. You can't design anything without first doing your homework. As an architect you have to ask yourself what problems the end product is going to solve. Or indeed, whether there is a solution at all.

TW *And is that what you learned from Saarinen?*

KR Eero was very, very bright, and he always wanted to think through the origins of any problem. You never learned that in architecture school. More pragmatically, you never learned the things most fundamental to him – that a building is only for people, at a specific moment in time, and that it has to evolve and have the capacity to change its culture and be exciting to live in, as well as doing all the usual, functional things like keeping the weather out. Working with Eero was in this sense a tremendous lesson for me. Forget about all the theories of architecture. Designing something that people occupy is the architect's job. There was nothing that Eero



Above: Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, images from the original slide presentation, Oakland Museum, 1961

© KRJDA

Opposite: Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, Oakland Museum, 1961–68

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said or did that even in some obscure way didn't have something to do with a project we were developing. He also never once stopped working. I remember when he was sketching out designs for the Yale hockey rink late one night we were having a debate about whether to do the roof in steel or concrete and at some point he suddenly looked around the office and exclaimed, 'Where the hell is everybody?' I replied that it was 9pm on a Sunday and it was New Year's Day. 'So what', he said.

TW *But after just over a decade of working like this, producing one building after another that would all go on to become celebrated, defining monuments of postwar American architecture, Saarinen suddenly dies from a brain tumour in September 1961. He was only 51 years old.*

KR I was going to get married the following Tuesday – I had fallen for Jane the moment I interviewed her for an interior design job in the office a few years earlier. On that Friday I was in New York seeing the CBS people to discuss the design of the elevators for their building on 52nd Street. I was called out of the meeting to take a call and was told that Eero had just died. I did what I thought Eero would do: I finished the meeting. Only after we were done did I tell them the news. All hell then broke loose. Afterwards I went out to Idlewild to check on the construction of the TWA terminal before flying back to Detroit. I remember reaching into my coat pocket on the way back and inside was a note from Eero that just said 'Bon voyage'. I think he knew. He was due to have an operation on his brain, and his wife Aline had asked me to pick up a bottle of champagne in New York to toast what she expected would be his recovery. Of course we never opened it.

TW *Did life suddenly feel very precarious?*

KR Words can't explain how devastating that moment was. But at the same time there seemed like there was just so much to do. This helped me get through it. I've always liked having a set of tasks to complete. Jane and I obviously postponed our wedding, and I bought her a pet monkey called Lucy to cheer her up. John Dinkeloo was also terrific. He was a really strong person. After years working together we had become good friends, and each night we ate in the same restaurant in Birmingham, Michigan – Heckert's. John was a very straight-down-the-line guy. He didn't allow drinking in his home and went to church every Sunday. Nevertheless, we always got along. The first thing we had to resolve was the planned move. In the last years of Eero's life Aline had become quite a force in the office and as a New Yorker she was increasingly keen to move out of Michigan and head back east. At the same time, the office had all these big East Coast commissions – Dulles, TWA, CBS,



Bell Laboratories in New Jersey and IBM in Rochester – and so it seemed only logical to move. We looked everywhere for a new home – Boston, Washington, and other smaller places up and down the coast, but ultimately because Eero was teaching at Yale and liked New Haven he wanted somewhere close by. I was assigned the task of finding the new office, and after a trip out here I came across this house in Hamden, which had been built for a man who manufactured cigars. He had been a Yale graduate and I remember one of the rooms had been converted into his own private Yale bar – he had the counter and stools and beer pumps and all the usual paraphernalia. But anyway, I got Eero over to have a look and he signed the deal on the house right then and there.

TW How big was the office by the time you moved?

KR We were close to 160 people. It had become a whole community, and we tried to replicate this in Hamden, encouraging our staff to stay with us and maintain the same communal spirit. There was so much work to do that I just lived above the studio, sleeping on a little pull-out cot, while Jane rented an apartment nearby.

TW And that work was completing all of the Saarinen projects. So over the next five years you kept the office name and saw through the

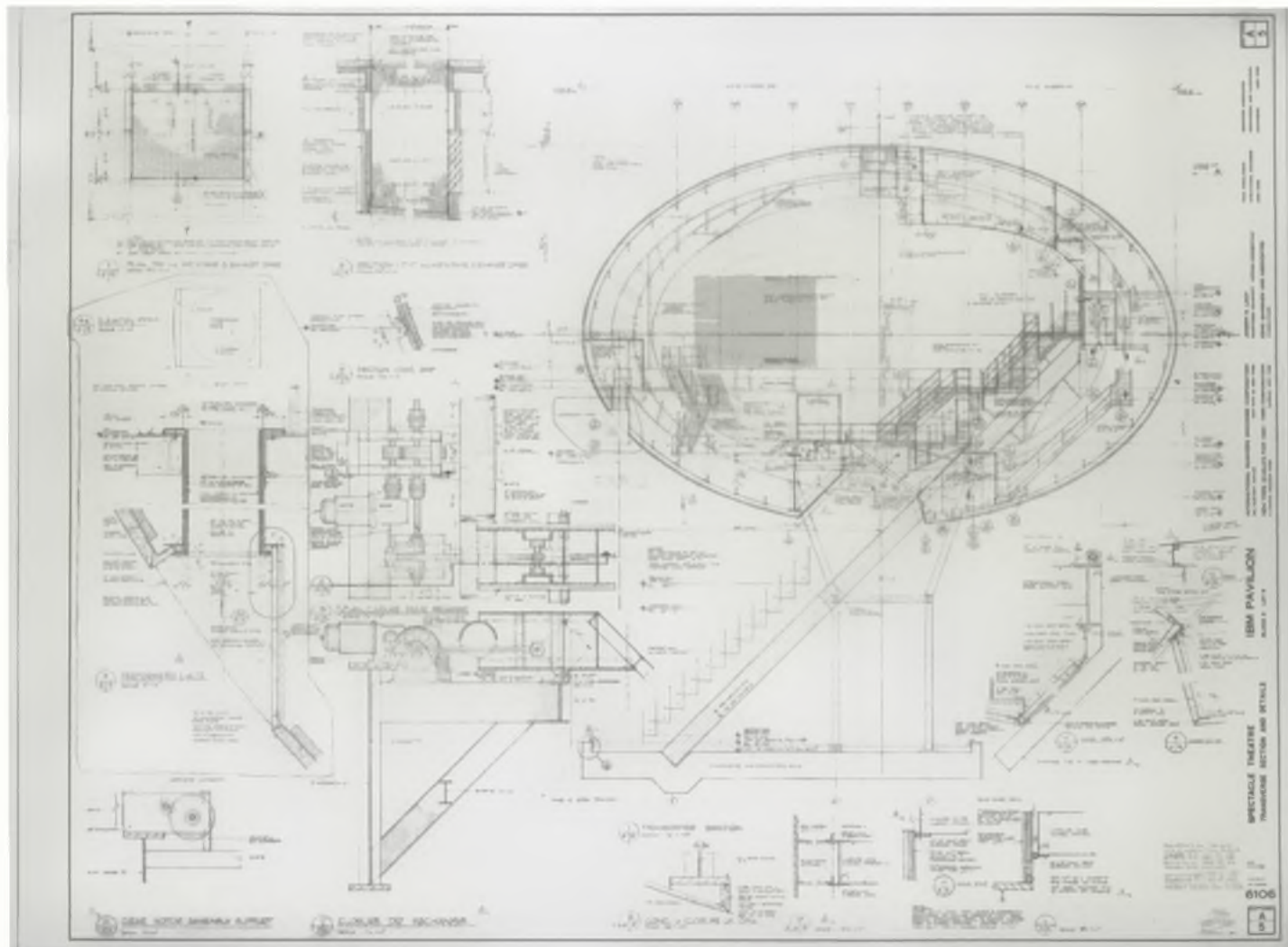
completion of the nine major projects already underway – like all those East Coast commissions you mentioned – and continued with other less developed projects, including the Gateway Arch in St Louis and the John Deere building in Moline. Only when these were complete, in 1966, did you change the office name to Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates and began again with the first job of your own, the Oakland Museum.

KR Oakland was actually concurrent with the completion of all those earlier projects. Aline really went to bat for us on that job. Eero was going to be interviewed for it, and after he died she spoke with the Californian architectural critic and writer Allan Temko and encouraged him to convince the jury to let us pitch for it. One of the backers of the project was a local woman called Mrs Fuller, and she took a shine to me, and the mayor of Oakland at the time was a man named Houlihan – it never hurts to

have an Irish mayor (the same thing happened later in New Haven when we did the Coliseum project). And in the end, even though we were up against architects like Breuer, Gropius, Johnson, Rudolph and Nervi, we got the job.

TW You also won despite breaking with the brief, which called for three separate museums, rather than the single big one you provided.

KR It just seemed logical to consolidate the three museums – culture, natural history and art – into one urban collective. We called our scheme ‘anti-architecture’ because we argued it was not about the form but the context and the relationships it fostered. The whole structure took up four whole blocks which connected with the existing streets, meaning people could enter the galleries and roof garden from multiple points.



TW Historians have recently characterised your Oakland scheme as a pioneering piece of ‘environmental’ architecture precisely because of this context you describe, but having heard you describe your father’s creamery in Mitchelstown and its importance in your childhood there also seems to be something peculiarly agricultural about it – I mean, this project and many others by you are, in a sense, all farms – always conceived as compounds of buildings with clearly defined perimeters, each building with its own predetermined function, held together by some connective thread but also defined by its relationship to nature, usually in the form of a garden.

KR Well, whether we like it or not, we are stuck with nature. And on Oakland, as you can see, the roof garden and all the planters and trees are fundamental to the project, even if the mayor, when he first saw the model, said, ‘What’s with all this broccoli?’ But I’ve never

really thought of it as a compound, or even as a museum for that matter. I tried to suggest instead that the emphasis should be on producing a sense of place. This carried over into the interior. I’ve always promoted the idea that in a museum or gallery you don’t want to see paintings in enormous rooms, you want to see them intimately, close up. But anyway, we pitched all these ideas to the jury – mostly through diagrams rather than drawings that they’d never understand – and they went for it. Even as I was presenting it to them I could feel their attentiveness and sympathy for the proposal.

TW What’s interesting to me is that these diagrams also had their own aesthetic. In the archives of your office or in the publications of

your work you rarely seem to find meticulous or artfully produced plans and sections, in the spirit of all those Beaux-Arts architects you were forced to look at as a student, but instead only graphic and very clear diagrams. There are even stories of the way you embedded these into your Oakland presentations – simple, coloured gouache drawings that were then photographed on slide film and presented alongside your oral narration of the project. In some way, one could argue that in addition to your architectural innovations these signature presentations show you

as the person who first developed a kind of proto-Powerpoint.

KR I’m not sure I am that guy – what we were doing then was simply a popular way of showing ideas – but I do remember developing our presentations in reaction to what traditionally happened. You used to see talks where an architect, imagining himself as some kind of mystical character, would simply show a scribbled sketch on a piece of tracing paper and expect you to build it. At no stage would you ever know what it was. And you’d certainly never be presented with an account of how the ideas or forms in the proposal had emerged. Even after Oakland, through my work with the Fine Arts Commission in Washington, I’d often be brought in to listen to architects pitching proposals. Despite the fact that I am fairly familiar with the world of architecture, I’d have real trouble understanding what the

hell so many of them were talking about. Most of the time they weren't just unable to solve the problem they were being asked to investigate, they couldn't even solve the problem of how to keep their drawings flat – they'd come into the room with these vast rolls of tracing paper which would be constantly curling up. And when they were eventually secured, all you'd see would be highly technical plans. Never any ideas. We tried to change all that. We first defined what we saw as the problem, then showed several options to solve that problem, then the one single option we thought best. We would end by rendering this option first in the most sensible way, then the most interesting way, then finally the most exciting way, building up the energy with each step.

TW As much as this was an honest account of the design process, I can also see how appealing this method of presenting was to a potential client. Even for me, listening to the way you talk through a scheme with your diagrams, I suddenly feel part of the process. And so this methodology must have been an obvious reason for your success, winning one big commission after another?

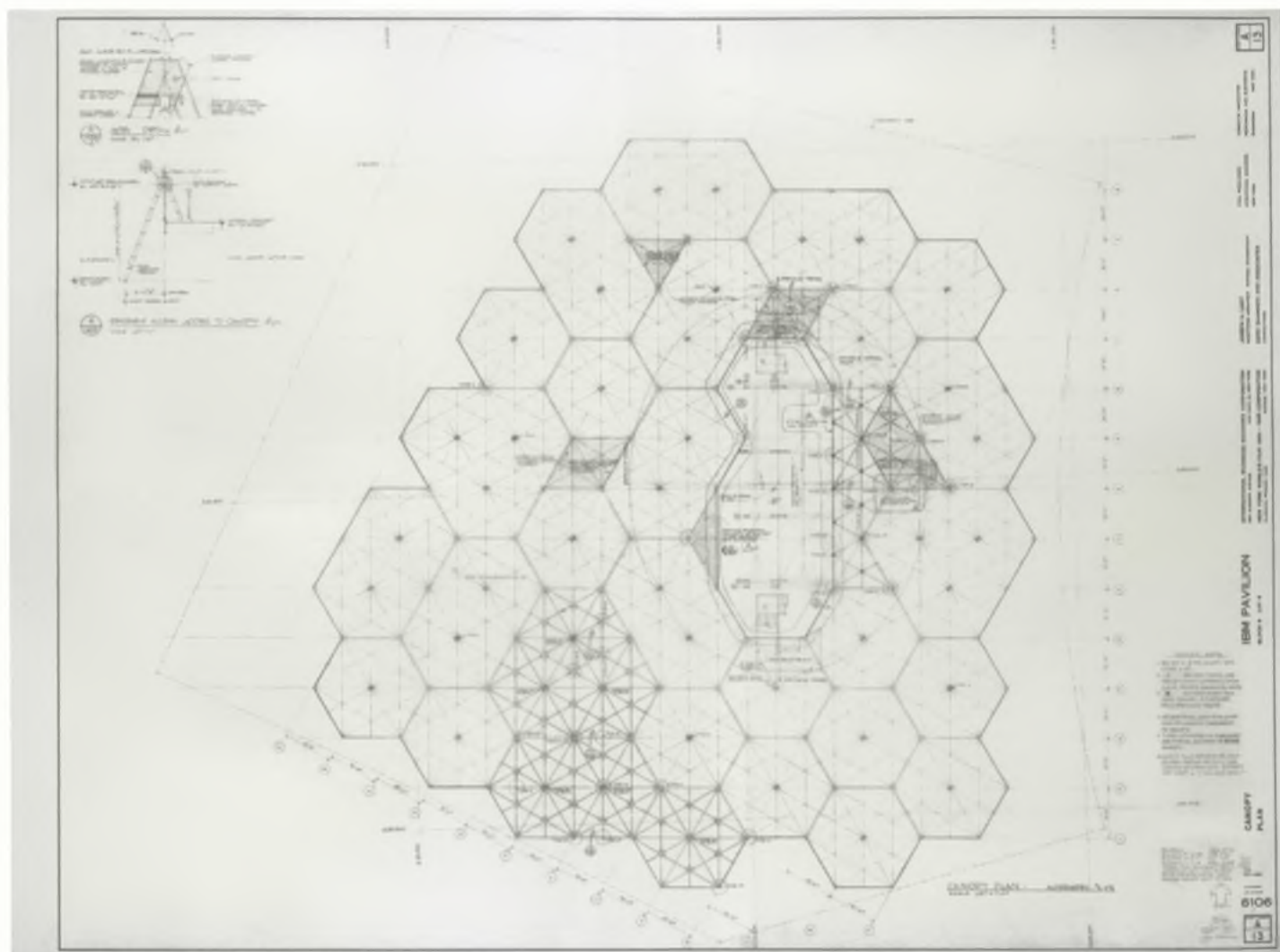
KR I think it didn't hurt.

TW In these presentations there also seems to be a continuation of your earlier exposure to Charles Eames, in the sense that he was the guy who throughout the 1950s was basing so much of his work around the graphic reinvention of how ideas are presented. And soon after working on Oakland, as another of the concurrent projects you did immediately after Eero died, but before renaming the office, you collaborated directly with Charles and Ray Eames on the IBM Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair.

KR I still have the script of the text I gave to the IBM employees in 1964, explaining why we designed the pavilion like we did – a one-acre site sheltered by a grove of 30 Cor-ten steel trees with an oval projection theatre at its heart – and a voiceover I delivered in my best Irish brogue. I can read it to you now. The beginning went like this: 'I am going to talk about two parts of the pavilion, the structure and the ovoid. Inevitably, I'm sure you will be asking yourself what on earth these strange structures

are. I must admit, we've had quite a battle trying to figure them out for ourselves. I suppose you could say they are trees, and in a way that might be the best description you could give them. And you might say that the form of the forest isn't too far off either, because after all, when you think about it, the shade of a group of trees is perhaps the best place for contemplation, for fun and for games. It is also a place for conversation and social exchange. So the concept of a forest as a place for things to happen is not a bad one at all.'

TW From this piece of oral history I can immediately understand why you won so many jobs. It's so clear. It's also quite informal, almost colloquial.



KR We just thought it important to present our ideas in the simplest possible terms. But still, the design involved a hell of a lot of research – in terms of the form of the trees and the configuration of the presentation theatre.

TW Was its central form – the ovoid decorated in thousands of small IBM logos – also a reference to IBM's Selectric typewriter 'golf ball' innovation, which had been introduced just a couple of years earlier?

KR No, but it should have been! I wish I'd thought of that. We could have used it in the presentation. We actually worked with Charles again a couple of years later with the National Fisheries Centre and Aquarium in Washington

Above and opposite:
Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo,
section and roof plan, IBM Pavilion, 1961–64
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Yale University Library

DC. This was a scheme that was basically developed in response to the urban plan of Washington, aligning it with the long axis of the National Mall and the Lincoln Memorial. The design was focused around a 60-foot-high curving greenhouse, which contained all these different microclimates. Charles designed all the exhibits inside. The original design was orthogonal. I remember after we did the curve I sent Charles a kind of Gehry-style sketch, and as soon as it arrived he called me up early one morning and really balled me out, 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' But anyway, he soon came to see the value of the curve and we completed the design and submitted it to Congress, who passed it. In the end, though, for some reason Nixon went out of his way to

cancel the project, and it was later relocated to Baltimore and redesigned by someone else.

TW I am sure that this scheme, like the great majority of your work, only emerged after an extended period of research, but still the silhouette of the design is a very powerful, formal one, as it is with nearly all of your projects. If you did a police-style line-up of all the designs you have ever produced you would see a succession of really striking formal geometries. But to call yourself a formal architect today is really to be an architect of gesture – like Frank

Gehry, as you said, or Zaha Hadid, sketching an artful, expressionistic shape and then building it. This is something you obviously distance yourself from, as you do from the grander Beaux-Arts tradition, which is also formal, but only on the basis of a more limited toy box of pre-existing shapes. So I'm wondering if form is ever something we can speak about in terms of your architecture?

KR Well, there's architects and there's architecture. Every architect likes to do things their own way, formal or otherwise, whereas architecture – classical, Beaux-Arts architecture – is really a formal language. In any period, the only thing that differentiated one architect from another was whether they spoke this language well or not. In contrast, modern architecture is not a language, or at least not yet. It's garbled, a blather, a hubbub. This is partly what makes it interesting. And so I don't





think you can talk about modern architecture in the same formal terms. Yet even modern architects sought out some kind of consistency – like Mies, it was part of their nature – because you can only change so much and because despite the wave of changes one hopes to make, there is still a straight line.

TW And was that your project – to find the straight line in modernism?

KR I don't think we ever thought about it like that. In architecture a form has to arrive eventually because you have to build something, but our forms were only ever the end product, and were never predetermined. Where and how they developed is another story entirely.

TW But whether formal or not – and again thinking of your career as a whole – the typical vehicle architects have always used to express themselves, or the usual calling-card for their ambitions, has been the house. It's through their houses that architects have traditionally sold their ideas. And yet in spite of your 70 years of practice you have designed very few houses.

KR I did do the Miller House with Eero, and another house for the Millers in Florida and one for the head of John Deere in California, but you're right in a way, I haven't done that many. Perhaps it's partly because a couple wanting a new house is the toughest kind of client an architect can have. Inevitably you find yourself having to moderate between a husband and wife who can never agree. You become a kind of marriage-guidance counsellor. Getting approval for houses is also difficult. I recently designed a house for someone on the shoreline in Rhode Island and had to present it to the people in the district who control what the place looks like. After I spoke a woman asked me why my design had no windows. I pointed out that the house had glass walls and so didn't need windows. That was as far as I got – they said that under no circumstances would they have a glass-walled house in Rhode Island and that it would totally destroy 200 miles of shoreline. I guess it was a lesson. You have to know your audience.

TW But if not houses, the one architectural type that has come to define so much of your work

is the corporate headquarters, which developed as a typology very much as you developed – in a way you are a product of each other.

KR It's true that these things ran parallel in time. In the 1950s, particularly in the East Coast around New York, we saw all these businesses getting bigger and bigger, just as our own firm was expanding, and soon they all wanted their own corporate building. For the architect, the model at the time was to design a series of boxes into which the employees would be allocated, with specific areas also suggesting a specific manner in which they would be expected to behave. Interestingly, the opposite is happening now – today there are no more boxes, only open space in which corporate employees are allowed to ramble around,



working, talking, eating and drinking together. But when we first got these commissions, as with all the work we did with Eero, we initially spoke with hundreds and hundreds of employees, trying to learn as much as we could about their working lives and the things that were important to them. We found it always came down to both little things, like more washbasins in the women's toilet, and bigger things, especially more contact with nature. Our designs were then always sold through the communities they provided – people work and behave better when they feel part of a

Previous: Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo,
Ford Foundation HQ, 1963–68
© Ezra Stoller / Esto

Above: Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo,
Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 1969
© KRJDA

community – and also through their contact with nature, minimising each employee's distance to the curtainwall, so that they would be closer to the outside, or as often developed, bringing nature into the building.

TW As you refined this approach did you look at older American corporate models? The typology, as you said, only really emerged with your commissions, yet there were still earlier corporate prototypes – I'm thinking especially of all those wonderful factories Albert Kahn did for Ford in the 1910s and 1920s.

KR We did look at them, even if they were never really acknowledged as architecture. Today we can see that Kahn was doing Mies before Mies, in that there was a tremendous logic to his approach. All very no-nonsense.

Bang, bang, bang. Everything straight down the line. Each component worked out perfectly. Was it architecture? Maybe not, but it was essential. However, Kahn was doing factories, which are very different to office buildings. The office project that we did look at very closely was the corporate headquarters Gordon Bunshaft designed for Union Carbide on Park Avenue. It's a really elegant building. Everything inside is designed on a five-foot module, and so the offices are either 25 × 25, 20 × 20, 20 × 15, 15 × 10 or 10 × 10.

I loved Gordon, but later, when we did our own building for Union Carbide in Danbury, I used these modules as an opportunity to tell them how wrong they were with everything. I argued that people were all the same size, regardless of whether they were chairman of the board or a file clerk. And so I thought everyone should have the same-sized office. Incredibly, they went for it. But the company itself had problems after they moved in. If you are an investor, the first thing you should do when a company decides to build its own headquarters is immediately sell all its stock. Out of the 37 or so corporate HQs we have done, most of them have gone out of business soon afterwards.

TW But one that hasn't, and perhaps your most famous piece of corporate architecture, is the Ford Foundation Headquarters in Manhattan, which you completed in 1968.

KR The Ford Foundation was really an attack on the traditional office building, with its central core and offices around the perimeter for privileged members of staff, and space nearer the core for the less privileged. If you put several of these buildings in a line you'd get a typical street, and if you put even more together you'd get a typical city. When you looked out of the window of one, you'd see another of exactly the same type. I argued that you can't create a community in that kind of building, and that this was an architecture of uniformity and isolation. The site itself was on the far eastern end of 42nd Street, squeezed between the usual skyscrapers of Midtown and a series of mock-medieval high-rise blocks called Tudor City along the river. They're quite bizarre but actually very nice, with lots of open space, gardens and playgrounds integrated within them. And so we thought our building should relate to this model rather than the more typical blocks the other side. At roughly 200 square feet we could have filled the site with five floors of offices, providing Ford with all the space they required, and then gone home. But this wouldn't have looked especially good. Or we could have halved the footprint, placing the building in the middle of a reduced site, and doubled the number of floors. But still, this wouldn't have changed the view for those inside. I also rejected the Seagram model, which everyone loved at the time, where you move the building to the back of the site and create a plaza at the front. I always disliked the way this set-back destroyed the line of the street. I realise this is quite irreverent for an architect, but I've always hated the Seagram building because of this. An even more extreme option – which we tried for a project for the Federal Reserve Bank in New York – would be to raise the building up 150 feet on four stilts and leave the whole of the ground vacant. But here the solution instead seemed to be to place a garden in the middle of the block, like a courtyard, and then wrap 12 storeys of office space around it. This was our preferred scheme for a while, but then one day as I was driving across the bridge in New



Haven, feeling guilty because I had to leave Jane who had just given birth to our son, it suddenly hit me that we should open up the plan so that the view looks towards the East River. And that's what we did, re-orientating the open space so that the garden occupied the whole of the southeast corner of the building. I was very happy with this solution, but I did make the classic mistake of presenting a model of the scheme to a group of elderly Ford executives immediately after they'd had lunch – as I was doing my song and dance half of them fell asleep. But still, they woke up in time to approve it. Some weeks later I walked the site with *The New York Times* critic Ada Louise Huxtable, explaining our solution to her, and she quickly became a supporter of the scheme.

TW *She certainly did. In her New York Times review of the completed building she called it 'a shimmering Crystal Palace' and 'probably one of the most romantic environments devised by corporate man'. On my way into your office this morning I thought I saw a chunk of the Ford Foundation building sitting in your car park, and I must admit, it did look a bit romantic.*

KR You saw that? You're right, it's a remnant of a 1:1 model of the stone finish, Cor-ten steel and brick paving we used in the building. We had it installed during the design and brought all of the board out here to take

Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo,
Knights of Columbus HQ, 1965–69,
and New Haven Veterans
Memorial Coliseum, 1965–72
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a look. There's actually another piece deeper within the trees at the side of the building. It looks like a kind of picturesque sculpture. We often worked like that – building 1:1 sections of the buildings we were designing. It's only at full size that you can get a proper sense of the materials. On the Ford Foundation we again used Cor-ten because we liked the way it worked with the first buildings we did for the John Deere HQ, which was completed around the same time. But you know, the idea of using Cor-ten originally came from something I said to Robin Walker. He was visiting us in Birmingham some time in the early 1960s, before our move to Hamden, and one night over a drink I said, 'You know Robin, this whole architecture thing is nonsense. What we really should

be doing is making sure all our buildings rust and fall apart after 20 years, because then we can start over again and redesign them.' The next day I was telling John Dinkeloo the same thing. John suddenly became very interested in the idea. He thought we really could produce a rusty building and soon afterwards spoke to one of our steel fabricators. It turned out that they were already experimenting with Cor-ten for some light poles they were producing. John quickly got them to make us some samples which we had delivered here. We liked them so much

we used Cor-ten on Deere and later Ford – two everlasting ruins!

TW *When I visited the building for the first time yesterday the thing that really struck me is that every single thing has been designed – not just the rusted patina of the Cor-ten but everything. There don't seem to be any stock components whatsoever. Every brick, every door pull, every window detail, even the lift, which is on its own idiosyncratic module, much taller than any other lift I have ever been in, is its own custom piece of design, and finished – as if to show off its uniqueness and the largesse of your client – in gold. It's the most golden building I have ever seen.*

KR Well, Ford really gave us the opportunity to rethink everything, and we, very gleefully, took it. Henry Heald, president of the Ford Foundation, was a really terrific client.

He had earlier been head of IIT and was rumoured to have been the guy who brought in Mies. When we were pitching for the job I made sure to tell him about my own experiences studying with Mies at IIT – of course I didn't tell him it was only for a semester.

TW *My friend Dietrich Neumann from Brown University was recently telling me about John McCloy, another key man at the time and chairman of the Ford Foundation board. Before the war he had personal encounters with both Hitler and Mussolini, and after it he became head of the World Bank, then the Chase Manhattan Bank. He was even a member of the Warren Commission into the assassination of John F Kennedy. Harper's Magazine once called him 'the most influential private citizen in the history of the US'.*

KR I'd forgotten about all that. McCloy and Heald hired a very competent building manager who was our regular contact, and after the board approved our design we just went ahead and did it. Besides, on any job, but especially the corporate HQs we've done, I always deal with the people down at the bottom. They're the real clients. Losers are much more interesting than winners.

TW *But whoever is at the top now, psychotic or not, has a decision to make, because it appears that Ford want to renovate the building, which means that the whole place is going to close for a couple of years while they carry out all the work.*

KR They made a few overtures about this to me some time ago, and I said I'd be pleased to do it, even *pro bono*, but then we never heard back from them. They've now hired another firm. It's a bit upsetting. I don't think they realise what they have there.

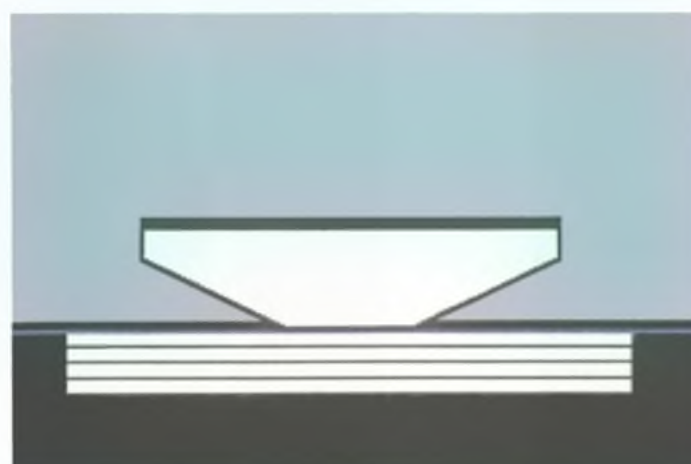
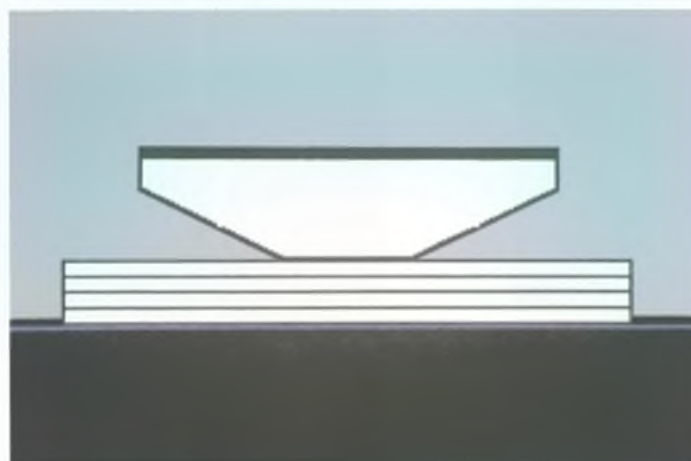
TW *This, in a way, pre-empts another question which concerns style – a concept that architects are traditionally a bit evasive about. Because when I look at the Ford Foundation building now or those sumptuous black-and-white Ezra Stoller and Balthazar Korab photographs of not just Ford but several of the other buildings you produced, especially in that really productive first decade of the office, I see an architecture with a very pronounced sense of style. The standard modernist line on style is that it doesn't exist, that architecture transcends style, and yet so much of the work you do seems compelling and necessary and also functional, but above all stylish.*

KR I think I inherited a residual sense of style from Mies, even if he never articulated it in those terms. I think I also inherited the idea that it really wasn't something we thought consciously about. As a designer it always seemed as if there were so many options available to us that trying to define a singular office style would have been too restricting. The building we completed a year after Ford, the Knights of Columbus headquarters in New Haven, is a case in point. Where the Ford

Foundation dissolved the corner, the Knights of Columbus reinforced it.

TW *Isn't the Knights of Columbus the one building of yours that Vincent Scully really hated?*

KR Loathed it. He went apoplectic when we first completed it. Holy God did Vince



dislike that building. And for the next 40 years he kept ranting about it. A number of people in the city also had mixed feelings, largely because there had always been this suspicion about the Knights – a fraternal Roman Catholic society set up in a town that is largely Protestant New Englanders. And so when we

Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo,
images from the original
slide presentation, New Haven Veterans
Memorial Coliseum, 1965

unveiled plans to house these evangelicising Catholics in this dirty great big skyscraper right at the front of the whole city it did cause some problems. But one crucial supporter was the mayor of New Haven, Dick Lee – another Irishman – who'd given me the job after I sat next to him one time on a flight. I must admit I'm fond of it too, even if the original design was ten storeys higher, which would have helped its proportions. The idea behind its design again came from a wish to rethink the conventional office – this time, questioning the standard, large open-plan floor, where you'd get rows and rows of desks and hundreds of people on a single level without ever being able to develop a sense of community. With the Knights we deliberately wanted to have a small floor plate, large enough only for 20 people or so. We also wanted to develop a model that challenged the standard office plan where the services run up the centre, and everyone sits around the edge. Here it's the opposite. All the services, except for the elevators, are in the corners, meaning each floor is open and able to take in the views. Another inspiration was the Tour de la Bourse skyscraper in Montreal, designed by Moretti and Nervi, which I'd seen shortly after its completion. The structural system for the building is not an internal frame but columns placed in each of the four corners. It made such a strong impression. Separately, while driving back home through Connecticut one day, I was passing Waterbury or one of the state's other more industrialised towns and I suddenly noticed these nineteenth-century circular brick chimneystacks which again produced a really powerful silhouette. They were a reminder, too, of the tradition in the Midwest of constructing grain silos out of interlocking 12" x 12" bricks – a type and material I had always loved. So at the Knights of Columbus we brought all these things together, pushing all the building services into four concrete brick-clad chimneys, which in turn supported the floor slabs. It's a simple structural system but an effective one. And it was very fast – the core of the chimneys was built using a non-stop concrete pour – so it appeared at its full height very suddenly (again, this might explain the reactions we got).

TW *The building itself was also not designed to stand alone, but was part of a bigger complex which included your Coliseum sports arena.*

KR We completed the Coliseum three years later in 1972. It, too, was designed as part of a major downtown redevelopment scheme, reimagining the centre of New Haven as an entertainment hub, able to absorb 2,400 cars and 9,000 people, but only half of the scheme – the arena – was ever built. The problem was that Dick Lee retired in 1970 before the complex was completed, and towards the end

of his term of office he was increasingly attacked by rival politicians who presented him as some sort of bullying dictator. Somehow the Coliseum came to be seen as the physical expression of his authority. And so when a new mayor came in, the city chose never to finish the whole complex. Worse still, they refused to set up the right kind of organisation to run and maintain those parts that were built. The result was that after being occupied for ten years or so the building was abandoned. Several years later, in 2002, mayor DeStefano blew it up. He even made this whole theatre out of its destruction, televising it and inviting thousands of people to come and watch. It was heartbreaking. Not long afterwards I did get a nice letter from Zaha Hadid, who wrote to say how impressed she had been by the building. That was kind of her. But I would much rather have the Coliseum still standing. It was so infuriating that the city, in its short-sightedness, had thrown away a perfectly good building.

TW Even if this building was designed as a kind of megastructure, it still seems to me that you are more comfortable with smaller-scale towns and suburbs than within inner cities, where you have built comparatively few projects.

I mean, you based your office in Hamden rather than New York, and most of your work appears in similar, small commuter towns all over New England. And so I'm wondering about your relationship, or even allegiance, to the city, country and suburb.

KR I think it again all comes back to this idea of community. The country is isolated, but a village is really the ideal community. A city, in effect, is multiple villages, but with multiple villages you get multiple problems. And so I prefer to design communities where their scale can be controlled. The perfect village for me has a couple of churches, a central square and a market, shops and houses. At this scale people talk to each other as a community. They feel comfortable like this.

TW But other architects, especially modern architects, are much more explicit about their fondness for the city. They like its density. They even like how generic it is, its anonymity.

KR For me, so many aspects of the modern city are a disaster. Look what's happened to Harlem in New York, where you now see all these endless high-rise housing blocks. They're no answer to anything. You see the same thing in every new Chinese city, where people are so isolated in their little apartment on the 25th floor. Before you had all these two- and three-storey blocks, which encouraged people to get out and walk around and interact with their neighbours, and which seemed to work just fine.

TW You have produced so many buildings that have tried to create this kind of interaction – mostly, it has to be said, low-rise but huge corporate complexes, set up as their own kind of complete environment, but perhaps just to end

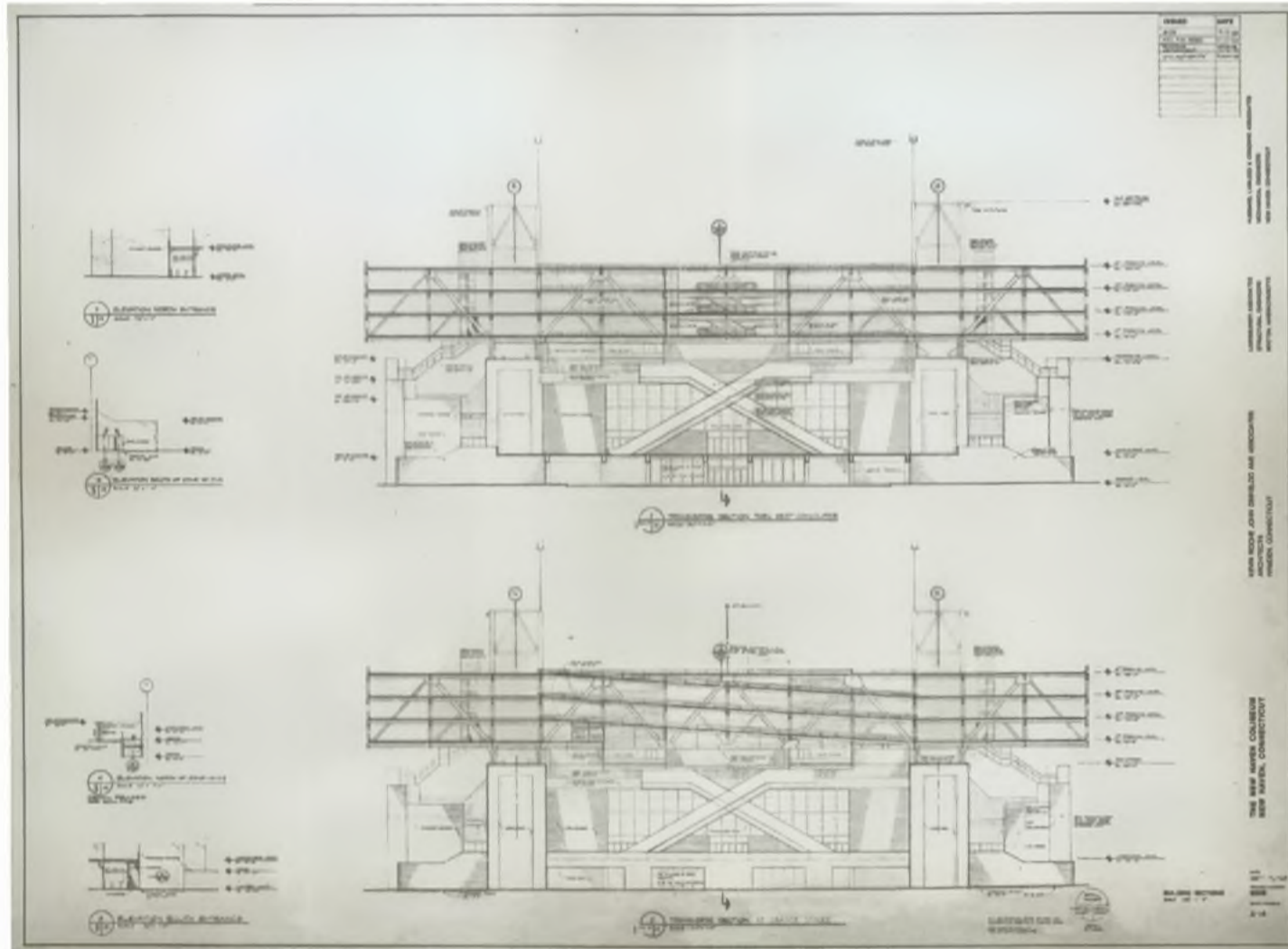
to the city by extending the front steps. We just tried to make the whole thing more legible.

TW After speaking with you for hours now, these seem to be the real, defining characteristics of all of your work – the ideas of legibility and communication. I could try to do a pop psychoanalytic interpretation and see all your buildings as coming out of the childhood diagram of your father's village farm and creamery, with everything working perfectly, each component in its right place, but the pursuit of clarity and legibility appears to be a more convincing common thread to your architecture. This, I suppose, is also another facet of your background – I don't mean your ability to convince through words, or even all those Irish clichés of the talker as charmer, the love of the craic, etc. Rather, the talker as

problem-solver, or simply the architect who sees the importance of describing what they will do, or have done, in the clearest possible terms.

KR Communication is fundamental to the design process. Maybe it even is the design process. And as you say, in addition to solving problems – of how many cars you can squeeze in, how many square feet you can find, how many columns you need – there's the problem of communicating all of that. Not just to the client, of course, but to everybody – the

contractor who has to build the thing, and the user who has to occupy it. All of this is an essential part of design. In art you don't have to communicate because the canvas speaks for you and you alone create it; but the very collective nature of architecture means you have to communicate. Without it you'd be lost. Of course, architecture has always been a language. It's just that for me it is a literal one, not symbolic. But, you know, at the same time, if I was being dispassionate, I'd also say that most architects can also talk absolute nonsense. Sometimes we just have to face up to this fact. And because of this there also often comes a time when you don't want your architect standing there, making all these big speeches about what they might be doing, or what it all means. You want them to just hurry up and get the roof over your head, because you know what, it's raining and without them you're going to get wet.



we could finish with a different type of building altogether – your work on the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which through a succession of different commissions occupied you for over 40 years.

KR We did work very closely with the Met for the previous 40 years, developing a masterplan for the site, only parts of which were built. At the core of our proposals was an attempt to make the building work better in terms of its relationship with Central Park, basing our designs around the implementation of large inclined glazed walls and courtyards – starting off with the Temple of Dendur in the Sackler Wing – and making the main entrance more welcoming and communicative

Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo,
section of the New Haven Veterans
Memorial Coliseum, c 1966
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