

The New York Times

Kevin Roche, Architect Who Melded Bold With Elegant, Dies at 96

By Paul Goldberger

March 2, 2019

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/arts/kevin-roche-dead-architect.html>

Kevin Roche, the Dublin-born American architect whose modernist buildings, at once bold and refined, gave striking new identities to corporations, museums and institutions around the world, died on Friday at his home in Guilford, Conn. He was 96.

His architectural firm, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, in Hamden, Conn., [announced his death](#) on its website.

Mr. Roche was one of the rare architects who was admired and trusted by corporate executives, museum boards and government officials, who allowed him wide leeway in expressing his restless formal imagination.

He was soft-spoken, with a distant echo of an Irish brogue, but it was an understated manner that belied the self-confidence radiated by the buildings he made for his patrons.

He created such distinctive works as [the Ford Foundation headquarters](#) in Midtown Manhattan, an elegant palazzo of dark metal and glass built around a garden atrium and finished in 1967; the [Oakland Museum of California](#) (1968), a museum whose terraced roof functions as a public park; [the General Foods headquarters](#) in Rye Brook, N.Y. (1982), a glass version of a grand classical villa; the sprawling [headquarters of Union Carbide](#) in Danbury, Conn. (1982), a futuristic machine for parking and working; and the headquarters of the [J.P. Morgan Bank](#) on Wall Street (1990), a skyscraper in the form of a classical column. And he put an indelible stamp on the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In 1982, Mr. Roche was [awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize](#), widely considered his profession's highest honor. In its citation, the jury said, "In this mercurial age, when our fashions swing overnight from the severe to the ornate, from contempt for the past to nostalgia for imagined times that never were, Kevin Roche's formidable body of work sometimes intersects fashion, sometimes lags fashion, and more often makes fashion."

The jury acknowledged that his work was hard to characterize, and that his buildings outwardly had little in common. To Mr. Roche, however, there was nothing inconsistent

about them; while he loved strong, memorable forms, he saw architecture as a matter of problem solving as much as shape making.

And he believed that because each building emerged out of a different situation, each called for something very different. It was a view he took from his mentor, [Eero Saarinen](#), whose thriving architectural practice formed the foundation of Mr. Roche's own.

Mr. Roche was hired by Saarinen in 1950, and before long he became the architect's chief design associate, working on projects like [the CBS Building](#) in New York (known as Black Rock); the [TWA Terminal](#) at Kennedy Airport; [Dulles International Airport](#), outside Washington; and [the Ingalls Skating Rink](#) at Yale University.

When Saarinen died suddenly in 1961 at 51, it fell to Mr. Roche and John Dinkeloo, another Saarinen lieutenant, to keep the office going and complete Saarinen's numerous unfinished works. As they began to take on new projects of their own, the Saarinen office transitioned into [Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates](#). [Mr. Dinkeloo died in 1981](#) at 63, after which Mr. Roche headed the office himself.

Mr. Roche was the favored architect of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; he designed all the wings of the museum's expansion, beginning with [the Lehman Pavilion](#), a sunken space with a central skylit gallery surrounded by a series of rooms, which opened in 1975.

His work at the Met also included the enormous glass pavilion enclosing the [Temple of Dendur](#), completed in 1979, and he redesigned the front stairs and the plaza in front of the museum.

The angular glass forms of the Met additions contrasted sharply with the ornate limestone facades of the museum's older sections. But when he was asked to take on the expansion of the Jewish Museum, across Fifth Avenue 10 blocks to the north, Mr. Roche took the opposite tack. When finished in 1993, his addition, to what was once the mansion of the banker Felix Warburg, mimicked the museum's 1908 limestone facade by C. P. H. Gilbert so precisely that it became difficult to know where the old building, in its French Gothic chateau style, ended and where his began.

It was a further sign of Mr. Roche's willingness to come up with widely different architectural responses to different architectural situations.

It was as a sculptor of modernist shapes in glass that Mr. Roche seemed most comfortable. He and Mr. Dinkeloo had been interested in the technology of glass since their early years with Saarinen, when Mr. Roche, looking at a pair of reflective sunglasses, proposed developing a reflective glass that could be used on buildings. One of his first major projects was a trio of glass pyramids that Mr. Roche built as the headquarters for [College Life Insurance Company](#) in Indianapolis, completed in 1971.

A few years later he designed [One United Nations Plaza](#) in New York, a sculptural skyscraper of gridded, blue-green reflective glass that is nearly as abstract as his

pyramids. The tower was the home of the United Nations Plaza Hotel (now the Millennium Hilton New York One UN Plaza), for which Mr. Roche designed a set of public spaces based on an intricate design of trelliswork and mirrors, endlessly reflecting. (When management wanted to renovate the hotel's restaurant and bar in 2015, preservationists protested that Mr. Roche's design was one of the city's finest interiors from the 1970s, and persuaded the hotel to reverse course.)



One of Mr. Roche's first major projects was a trio of glass pyramids that were completed in 1971 as the headquarters of the College Life Insurance Company in Indianapolis. Credit Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates LLC

A Patron in Indiana

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was not Mr. Roche's only long-term client. One of his most important legacies from Saarinen was his relationship with [J. Irwin Miller](#), chairman of the Cummins Engine Company and a patron of architecture. Mr. Miller had transformed Cummins's hometown, Columbus, Ind., into an architecture mecca, with buildings by both Saarinen and his father, Eliel Saarinen, in addition to others by I. M. Pei, Robert Venturi ([who died in September](#)), César Pelli, Richard Meier and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

Mr. Roche met Mr. Miller when Mr. Roche was put in charge of the house in Columbus that Saarinen was designing for the Miller family, an assignment that confirmed Mr. Roche's importance in the Saarinen office. After Saarinen's death, Mr. Miller began to turn to Mr. Roche for commissions.

Mr. Roche designed numerous projects for Cummins, including [its corporate headquarters](#). Although he usually declined to do private houses, he, like Saarinen, made exceptions for Mr. Miller; in 1982, he designed a lavish residence for him and his wife, Xenia Simons Miller, in Hobe Sound, Fla.

For all Mr. Roche's delight in creating crisp, nimble architectural shapes in glass, some of his most notable early work came across as anything but light. For one of the most important projects he worked on with Saarinen, [the John Deere headquarters](#) in Moline, Ill., Mr. Roche proposed developing a kind of steel that could be allowed to rust naturally. The resulting rough, reddish-brown product, Cor-ten, became a common building material.

While the elegant Deere building, completed in 1964, was widely admired, Mr. Roche used Cor-ten to considerably less critical acclaim on two projects in New Haven: the tower headquarters of the [Knights of Columbus](#) (1969), and the adjacent [New Haven Coliseum](#) (1972). The image there was anything but light, and the rusting steel and heavy, dark brown masonry blocks and gargantuan columns gave the complex an ominous tone.

Vincent Scully, the Yale architecture historian, wrote that those buildings and another Roche project in New Haven, a sprawling [concrete high school](#), "all share a kind of paramilitary dandyism which seems especially disturbing at the present moment in American history."

Mr. Roche was not pleased by Mr. Scully's view that his assertive forms somehow reflected the bombastic and overbearing elements of the United States during the Vietnam War. In the Knights of Columbus tower, in which the steel beams supporting each floor are like huge bridges connecting four enormous circular piers at each corner, Mr. Roche felt that he was really just exploring architectural ideas, experimenting with scale and trying to figure out new ways in which to organize and erect a tall tower.

Although Mr. Scully never moderated his feelings toward much of Mr. Roche's work of the late 1960s, the two men, neighbors in the New Haven architecture community, eventually became friendly, and Mr. Roche was among the eulogists at a memorial service for Mr. Scully, [who died in 2017](#).

Regardless of his intentions, Mr. Roche was clearly an architect of the corporate, political and cultural establishment. His Ford Foundation headquarters united his favorite forms and materials — large amounts of glass, emphatic masonry and dark Cor-ten steel — with the elegance of an interior garden by [the landscape architect Dan Kiley](#).

The Ford commission was widely seen as a softer, more humane building than the structures in New Haven. But housing luxurious quarters and raising midcentury modernism to the level of monumental grandeur, it prompted some critics to question the appropriateness of such an office for a nonprofit foundation, even if it was at the time the wealthiest one in the world.

In response, writing in *The New York Times*, the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable delivered a rousing defense not just of Mr. Roche's architecture, but also of the idea of an ambitious work of architecture. The building, she said, "could come under the heading of one of the foundation's more valid contributions to the arts."

Her view that Mr. Roche's Ford building would be of long-term benefit to New York was recently borne out by the foundation's decision to invest more than \$200 million in a complete restoration and update of the building, which reopened last fall as the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice.

First Commission: A Piggery

Eamon Kevin Roche was born in Dublin in June 1922 to Eamon and Alice (Harding) Roche.

"At the time, after Ireland was seeking independence, my father fought on the Republican side and spent time in jail," Mr. Roche told [The Irish Times in 2017](#). "I was born when he was in jail. So my mother was kind of destitute, and I was born over her sister's shop. When he got out of jail, my father took a job in a creamery. Typical for him, he took over the neighboring creamery within a year."

His father went on to head the largest dairy farm cooperative in Ireland, in Mitchelstown, County Cork, where Kevin grew up.

When Mr. Roche was 19 and a year into his architecture studies at University College Dublin, his father gave him his first commission, a piggery for a thousand hogs. After getting his degree and working for architects and planners in Ireland and London, he moved to the United States in 1948 to study under [Mies van der Rohe](#) at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.

He left after only a year, however, finding Mies's approach not sufficiently socially engaged, and joined Wallace K. Harrison's team of designers working on the United Nations headquarters. When the design was complete, he was laid off, but he managed to get an interview with Saarinen, whose practice, then small, was beginning a rapid ascent to the top tier of American architecture.

Mr. Roche moved to Saarinen's office, in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and was assigned to work on the [General Motors Technical Center](#), a sprawling campus of 24 modern buildings that would become emblematic of corporate architecture of the early 1950s.

When Saarinen died in 1961, his office had grown from 10 employees to 160, and he was doing some of the most important architectural projects in the country. He was also on the verge of moving his office from Michigan to Hamden, outside of New Haven.

Mr. Roche did what he thought Saarinen would have wanted, he said, which was to keep everything going: All of the staff remained, all of the buildings moved forward as planned, and even the cross-country relocation of the office went ahead just weeks after Saarinen's death.

The only thing Mr. Roche postponed was his wedding, to Jane Clair Tuohy, which had been scheduled for the month Saarinen died, September. They did eventually marry, in June 1963, and had two sons, Eamon and Paud, and three daughters, Anne, Denis and Alice. Mr. Roche is survived by his wife, his children and 15 grandchildren.

Shortly after Saarinen died, Mr. Dinkeloo, Mr. Roche's partner, persuaded him to enter a competition to design a new museum in Oakland. His entry, envisioning a low concrete building consisting of a series of terraces with a park on the roof, won the competition, and Mr. Roche's career as an independent architect had begun.

He continued to finish projects Saarinen had started, including the [IBM Pavilion](#) at the 1964 New York World's Fair, designed in collaboration with Charles Eames, and the John Deere headquarters in Illinois. But increasingly the focus was on new work, mostly for corporate clients.

Parking Below

Mr. Roche became the architect of choice for large corporations seeking a suburban headquarters that would also stand as a one-of-a-kind work of architecture. He was particularly interested in integrating interior gardens into work spaces, as well as in finding different ways in which to hide the automobile, the bane of the office park. Almost no Roche building sits in a sea of surface parking: Parking is typically underneath the offices.

Mr. Roche also designed the [headquarters of Unicef](#), the [Central Park Zoo](#) and the [Museum of Jewish Heritage](#), all in New York, as well as the [headquarters for Bouygues](#), the French construction company. For Bouygues he designed a version of a French chateau outside Paris in concrete panels and reflective glass, set over parking — a sprawling corporate Versailles in glass.

Many of his structures from the late 1980s, like Bouygues, show that Mr. Roche was paying attention to the postmodern trend of that decade, when many architects turned away from modernism and incorporated historical elements into their work. He was never identified as a postmodernist, but he willingly produced his own version of postmodernism, especially in buildings like the Jewish Museum, Bouygues and 60 Wall Street in Lower Manhattan, formerly the headquarters of J. P. Morgan, a bulky

skyscraper with a mansard roof that attempts to mimic in glass the image of a classical column.

These were among Mr. Roche's more inventive riffs on traditional architecture, with which he appeared to have something of a lover's quarrel, alternately embracing and spurning it, or twisting it to his own purposes. He may have been the only winner of [the Pritzker Prize](#), which generally honors architects whose work has sent the profession in new directions, to have also won an [Arthur Ross Award](#), in 1992, for classical architecture.



Mr. Roche in 2007 in Hamden, Conn., where he maintained his office. He was widely regarded as an architect of the corporate, political and cultural establishment. Credit Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

In 1993 Mr. Roche was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, the highest honor the institute bestows.

When Mr. Roche received the Pritzker in 1982, he delivered an acceptance speech that displayed both his capacity for self-deprecating humor and his belief that architecture was a noble pursuit. He quoted from a letter he had received complaining that his work was “moribund” and that the Pritzker jury “must be out of their minds” to have given him the prize.

He could only respond, he said, by asking: “Is not the act of building an act of faith in the future, and of hope? Hope that the testimony of our civilization will be passed on to others, hope that what we are doing is not only sane and useful and beautiful, but a clear

and true reflection of our own aspirations. And hope that it is an art, which will communicate with the future and touch those generations as we ourselves have been touched and moved by the past.”