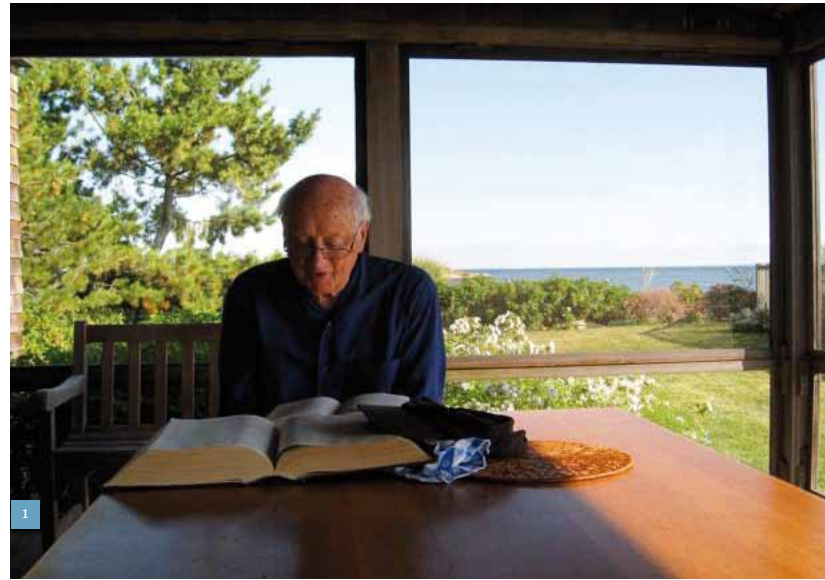


Kevin Roche – The Architect at 90

By Tony Reddy



Kevin Roche, the Irish-born, Pritzker prize-winning architect, celebrated his 90th birthday on 14 June. Even at 90, Kevin Roche is still working on new projects – just as Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius did and Oscar Niemeyer, the architect of Brasilia, is still doing at the age of 104. “He only stopped coming in on Saturdays last January”, Roche’s secretary Cathy Chase told me last August, when I rang to arrange a meeting with my former employer, with whom our practice had recently collaborated on the National Conference Centre, his only building in Ireland.

In September 1961 Roche was launched on a trajectory that would see him recognised as one of the great architects of the late 20th century when his boss, world-famous Eero Saarinen, died suddenly at the age of 51, leaving Roche and John Dinkeloo to finish such iconic projects as the TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport, New York, the Gateway Arch in St Louis, Missouri and the CBS Tower, New York.

Kevin studied architecture at UCD from 1940 to 1945 where the education philosophy was firmly embedded in the Beaux Arts tradition. A significant memory of his student days, which he often related to me, was an incident that occurred regarding a modernist house he had designed containing a spiral staircase. At the end-of term crit to review student projects, his scheme was being well received by his tutors

until a high pitched voice piped up from the back of the studio: “How would you get a coffin down those stairs”. It was Mattie Mc Dermott, the future Professor of the History of Architecture. The effect was frustrating for the young Roche as he listened to the critique on his project degenerate into obscure references to building bye-laws and codes.

Roche graduated from UCD in 1945 and joined Michael Scott. Projects on which he worked included Busáras and Donnybrook bus garage. “We really knew very little then”, Roche recalled, as he related a young Ove Arup becoming utterly frustrated with his lack of understanding of fundamental structural principles when they were discussing concepts for an apartment project: “He finally got irritated with me and threw my model on the floor and stood on it. ‘See it has no laterals, no lateral strength.’” Roche then went on to work with Maxwell Fry in London where his experiences included projects in Africa.

In 1948 Roche decided to go to Chicago to study under Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He realised he had learned all he could from the great master when, having produced a pitched roofed concept for a project, in contrast to the Miesian boxes of the other students, Mies dismissively remarked, as he inhaled slowly on his ubiquitous cigar, “you might do it that way but I would not do it that way”. In

1949, Roche went to New York where he worked for Harrison Abramovitz, the firm overseeing the construction of the United Nations building. Chance rather than a grand plan led him to join Eero Saarinen and Associates in the Spring of 1950:

“I was out of work in New York in 1949 for about five months and I was completely broke. I had a cousin, Kathleen Ryan, who was a movie actress and got a contract to star in a movie with James Mason. She arrived in New York with an MGM expense account. We went on a tremendous binge for about a week. Someone I worked with on the UN Building had recommended me to Eero. We arranged an interview for early morning at his bedroom at the Plaza Hotel. I had been up all night at the Stork Club and arrived as Eero was getting up. He began to interview me and I sat on the edge of the bed. Eero had a rather dull delivery and I fell asleep. I woke up and he was still going on about something (...). In any case, Eero hired me and in a few days I got on a train to Detroit and got a bus to Bloomfield Hills.”

Saarinen had just been commissioned to design the vast General Motors Technical Centre, a 24-building complex with a budget of \$100 million, the most expensive project of its time for the world’s largest corporation. When Roche joined Saarinen, the office consisted of just 10 people so that he was given substantial responsibility early on and by 1954 had established himself as Saarinen’s main design associate.

One of his early designs on the General Motors project was for the lobby of the Research and Styling buildings, including the spiral staircase, which became the most photographed interior of the building complex. As he developed the design for this spiral staircase ironic memories of his student days at UCD must have returned to him.

With an increasing number of projects the office was divided into its distinct design and production wings led by Roche and Dinkeloo. Their clients were some of the most powerful in corporate America – CBS, IBM,



TWA, Cummins Engine Co and John Deere. After Saarinen’s death, all of them appointed Roche Dinkeloo as their architects for later projects.

Roche recalled hearing the news of Saarinen’s death while he was at a meeting at CBS in New York discussing the number of elevators in their new tower building. “We wanted 18 and they wanted to increase this to 20, which messed up the plan. I got an urgent telephone call telling me that Eero had died after his operation for a brain tumour. I went back into the meeting and told everyone that he had died. After much consternation we decided to continue with the meeting. Eero would have appreciated that. He was very pragmatic....”

In the following week, Roche and his future wife Jane were due to be married but they decided to postpone the event “as it didn’t seem like the right moment with so many problems and things going on.” In addition, the remainder of the office was due to move from Michigan to New Haven in the next couple of weeks. After the move was successfully completed, Kevin and Jane were duly



married, went on to have five children and twelve grandchildren and remain a devoted couple.

Roche, then still not a US citizen, knew that the practice had almost four years of work to complete all of Saarinen’s projects. John Dinkeloo, who was older than Roche and a partner of Saarinen, knew that only the way for the practice to survive beyond that was to generate additional work and it needed a designer to replace Saarinen. A few years prior to Eero’s death he and Roche had planned to go into business for themselves but Eero talked them out of it.

They managed to persuade the organisers of an architectural competition for the Oakland Museum in California to keep Eero Saarinen and Associates among the contenders after the principal’s death. Competing against such eminent figures as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, Pier Luigi Nervi, Josep Luis Sert and Minoru Yamasaki, Roche went on to win the commission. The decision not to build a tall monument but instead to create a low series of exhibition spaces with a public park overhead – implementing a long-lost objective of the original masterplan for the city – was hailed as revolutionary in terms of design and environment. Indeed, Dinkeloo was moved to tears by the sheer power of the young Irishman’s presentation to the competition jury.

Two further commissions – the IBM Pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair and the Ford Foundation Building – established the reputation of the two new principals in their own right. By the time that they had completed all of Saarinen’s remaining commissions and formed a new partnership, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates (KRJDA), in 1965, their reputation was well established in the design world and with their clients.

1. Kevin Roche at his Cottage, New Haven
2. Spiral Staircase, General Motors
3. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
4. Ford Foundation HQ, New York
5. Oakland Museum of California
6. Kevin Roche and Tony Reddy in the offices of KRJDA
7. Santander, Madrid.

The practice quickly built upon Saarinen’s reputation as the favourite architect of corporate America to complete projects such as Aetna Life headquarters, Hartford; College Life Insurance headquarters, Indianapolis; Union Carbide headquarters, Connecticut; Bouygues headquarters, Paris, and Banco Santander headquarters, Madrid. The practice also completed major public and educational projects such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, Rochester Institute of Technology and Denver Centre for the Performing Arts.

Kevin Roche is surely one of the most significant architects of the late 20th century. His Ford Foundation and Oakland Museum are epoch-defining buildings and the entire body of his work is a testament to his place in the architectural firmament. Let us celebrate his achievements in his ninetieth year and marvel at his continuing commitment to his work and profession.

