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EXHIBIT REVIEW

The corporate architect



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEVIN ROCHE JOHN DINKELOO AND ASSOCIATES

TOWER OF POWER? Kevin Roche's firm designed Lafayette Tower, a dreary-looking glass box in the District. The building won a prized certification for energy savings.

Roche's designs had technocrats in mind

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

In the mid-1980s, I was condemned to spend several years in New Haven, Conn., at the time one of the saddest and ugliest cities in the world. Preeminent among the many ugly things in New Haven were two buildings designed by Kevin Roche: a factorylike stadium, which placed parking above the arena, and a fortresslike office tower with massive turrets at each corner, which was so bluntly arrogant in its blank, alien form that it made all the city seem its prisoner.

An exhibition of Roche's work at the National Building Museum doesn't make these

buildings seem better, but it does absolve Roche of the worst things you might think about him if you knew only his New Haven abominations. With partner John Dinkeloo, Roche's firm became the successor to Eero Saarinen's office after Saarinen died in 1961 at age 51. They saw through to completion several of Saarinen's most revered projects, including the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and Dulles International Airport.

But when Roche began working under his own name in 1966, his output didn't have the sculptural exuberance or high-minded utopian imagination of Saarinen. Responding to the robust economy and the emer-

gence of giant American corporations, with their seemingly bottomless appetite for new office space, Roche responded with technocratic fervor, rewarding his clients with giant, geometrical enactments of their organizational structure. He made architecture look like a flow chart.

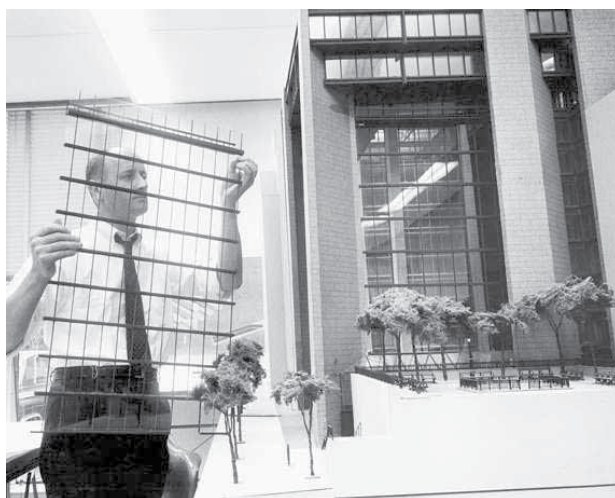
It's hard to be objective about an architect when you have long hated even one of his buildings. It's also hard being objective about the architecture of the 1960s and '70s, which seems like a very bleak period, the heyday of brutalism and too many vitiated efforts to purify or dress up the dying modernist box. There has been a push recently to reassess the architects of this period, including meticulous renovations that have forced reappraisal of some buildings once thought irredeemably hideous. And, of course, taste changes, so perhaps the '60s and '70s will seem as fashionable in a few years as mid-century modern is now.

But Roche and Dinkeloo (as KRJDA) built some real stinkers, and they were often working on such a scale that when a building failed, it failed big, bad and awful. To be fair to this exhibit and to Roche (who is still active in his 90s), it's worth putting in one column all the good things about his oeuvre.

The building museum exhibit, a smaller version of a show organized by the Yale School of Architecture, stresses the architect's environmental sensibility, arguing that he was ahead of his time in thinking about building systems and how buildings relate to the world around them. One of Roche's best buildings, the 1963-68 Ford Foundation Building in New York, arrayed offices around a huge internal garden, one of the early examples of the giant terrariums that have become standard in hotel lobbies and corporate space.

Clients loved him, and in many cases, remained faithful to his firm over decades. Among Roche's institutional patrons is New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, a landlocked, land-hungry beast that he has been helping expand and modernize since 1967, most recently with a newly designed American Wing, which opened this year.

Even his corporate spaces, which re-



PUTTING IT TOGETHER: Kevin Roche in 1964 with a scale model of New York's Ford Foundation Building. A National Building Museum show explores his work.

sponded to the needs of the company and the basic human needs of its employees, were often innovative. A 1970-75 corporate headquarters for the pharmaceutical company Richardson-Vicks in Connecticut was nestled into a wooded environment with as much care as possible to keep the landscape intact. Parking was placed above and below the building, which was built not by clear-cutting the landscape, but from one end to the other, to minimize impact on the forest. With their windows and offices arrayed to maximize light and views, and with their forests and moats and artificial lakes, Roche's corporate buildings are often a delight to work in.

Even the ghastly things he built in New Haven have a certain logic. The Knights of Columbus Building, which looks like a giant stack of identical stereo components, was designed to place stairways and toilets in its four corner turret towers, keeping the main office floors open from unnecessary obstructions. The arena, which has been torn down, solved a basic parking issue with a brute but rational solution. A high water table meant that parking couldn't be placed underground, so with one quick slice through the Gordian knot, Roche placed it above, accessible by spiral ramps.

It's also possible that hostility to Roche's work stems from a more fundamental and problematic hostility to his corporate clients. Roche helped define the "corporate" look: the sleek shiny glass walls, the capacious campuses with carefully manicured glimpses of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEVIN ROCHE JOHN DINKELOO AND ASSOCIATES



BODY OF WORK: Kevin Roche is behind the College Life Insurance Co. building in Indianapolis, top, and Temple of Dendur at the Met, above, in New York.

nature. In the 1960s and even into the '70s, it appeared that corporations were our friends, a ready and reliable route to prosperity, with promises of pensions, health care and career-long loyalty. But they were amoral entities, and the fact that they have mostly absolved themselves of any sense of local responsibility, any loyalty to their employees and any moral niceties beyond the duty to maximize profit shouldn't be held against an architect such as Roche. As the classic argument goes: If he hadn't been building them good buildings, somebody else would have built them bad ones.

At the heart of Roche's career and this exhibit is a fundamental question: What does it mean to serve power? The best of Roche's work expressed an intelligent response to technical, architectural problems. It was tinkering on a grand scale to make the wheels of power turn more efficiently, with less of a toll on the people inside and out. More disturbing are the works that simply

flattered power — the triple pyramids of the 1967-71 College Life Insurance Co. in Indianapolis that reflect the hierarchy of the corporate ladder or the inhuman, Versailles-like symmetries and vistas of the 1983-88 Bouygues World Headquarters in France. If power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, what can be made, morally, of buildings that tell their inhabitants you run the world?

The final verdict on Roche's work, and the work of architects like him, is decades away. His firm is still working and building in Washington (the quite good Station Place 1 near Union Station and the dreary, shiny glass box of Lafayette Tower are by KRJDA). He has won just about every major prize that can be bestowed on an architect, including the Pritzker in 1982 and the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 1993. The horrendous buildings he created in New Haven (and some proposed structures such as the mercifully unrealized 1969 plan

for the Federal Reserve Bank of New York) expressed an aesthetic that developed into something lighter, more refined and anodyne.

In the end, Roche's reputation will rise or fall depending on what becomes of the corporate world he served. If the end of corporate America is a dystopian hell of environmental catastrophe, vast economic inequity and social instability, the corporate architects of our age will not be remembered

fondly. But if our age yields to a better one, just as the tyrannies and kleptocracies of past centuries sometimes yielded (perhaps temporarily) to more enlightened, democratic societies, then Roche's work might have the charm of baroque palaces, Egyptian pyramids and Parisian avenues. Amnesia and nostalgia are powerful forces, as anyone who has watched "Mad Men" knows.

kennicott@washpost.com