

Roche exhibit an architectural reminder of spirit of hope, newness

KEVIN Roche is an architect, but he and his work are also a window to a world that has more or less vanished.

That world is on display in “Kevin Roche: Architecture As Environment,” an exhibit through May 6 at the Yale University School of Architecture Gallery.

The exhibit is appropriately twinned with its predecessor from last year, “Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future.” For both, the curator is Yale professor Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and financial support comes from ASSA ABLOY, the Scandinavian hardware company with a facility on Long Wharf Drive.

Roche had a classic mentor-mentee relationship with Saarinen that catapulted him into prominence when Saarinen died prematurely in 1961.

After Saarinen’s death, Roche kept his office in New Haven. It was located in the vicinity of Yale because Saarinen was committed to teaching as well as practicing architecture, like Cesar Pelli, who also is locally based.

But, teaching did not keep Roche here. “Mayor Richard Lee gave him two commissions, and New Haven was a happening place,” noted Pelkonen.

His work in New Haven can be seen best in a three-part ensemble: the perfectly preserved Knights of Columbus building; the dramatically changed Lee High School, now the Yale School of Nursing; and the Coliseum, now demolished.

They show Roche’s breakout from Saarinen’s softer, more sculpted work — Ingalls Rink, the TWA terminal at John F. Kennedy International Airport — into a new generation’s exploration of architectonic structural expression.

A fourth building, not designed by Roche, is a rare example of design biplay between two architects. The cylindrical corners of Roche’s Knights of Columbus building are virtually inverted by the cut-off corners of Tower One, designed by

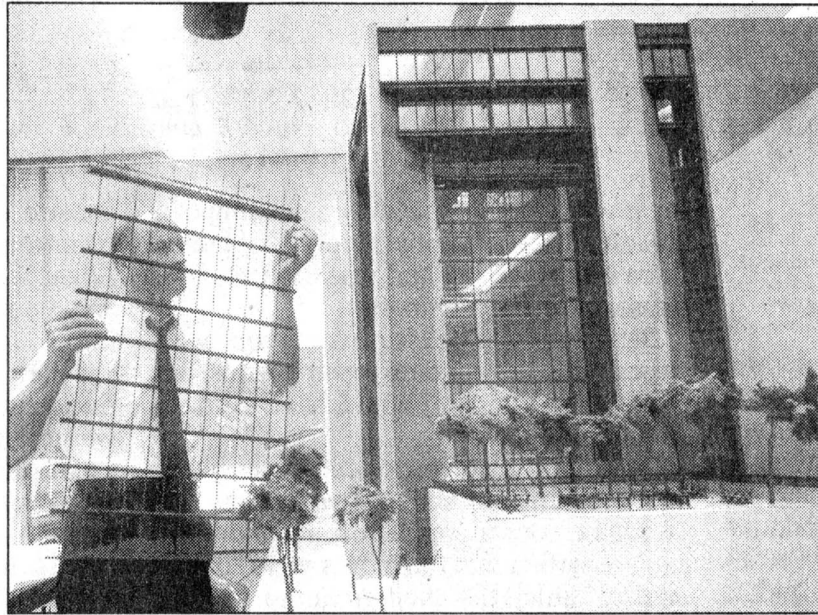


Photo courtesy of Yale School of Architecture

Kevin Roche, in 1963, works in his Hamden studio on his signature commission, The Ford Foundation Building.

Charles Moore a decade after the K of C tower was built. If not created as commentary, this building takes advantage of intentional contrast.

The most recent piece of Roche’s New Haven work is the 2009 renovation of his master’s local icon, Ingalls Rink, known as the Yale whale.

The Roche exhibit is a full-on celebration of the architect persona and the zeitgeist of mid-20th century Modernism. Huge models and equally huge archival photos and drawings are carefully arrayed in the newly restored gallery of Paul Rudolph’s signature Art and Architecture Building. They will be traveling to a long string of other venues.

Despite the laser focus on Roche and his work, the net effect of the exhibit is to offer up the sensibility of the architects who dominated a bygone era.

For Roche, his predecessors and peers, an ethos of saving the world through architecture was the norm, with the white male architect leading the

way to a higher truth.

Roche has outlived almost all of his peers, save Pelli. But, this exhibit seems cast in the period when Roche was as hot as any architect in the world. It was a time when a building’s celebrity was mod, fab and groovy — inherently jazzy in its slightly glitzy edge and razor sharp detailing.

Although virtually every significant commission — from the additions to New York’s Metropolitan Museum to the massive General Foods Headquarters in Westchester County — has ample exposure in this exhibit, it is Roche’s Ford Foundation building in Midtown Manhattan that is the perfect manifestation of the era and the man.

The building is a Camelot icon — a temple to “the best and the brightest” exercising a noblesse oblige of

the cool — the birthing room for the Peace Corps, NPR and the space race. The building houses intensely smart people who reward other intensely smart people with old money patronage for new causes.

Like Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute, the Ford Foundation building captures the energy of intellectual and aesthetic elites in built form. The Ford Foundation building is simultaneously button down and virile, completely tailored, but self-consciously cutting edge.

For that brief period after Dwight D. Eisenhower was president and before the full impact of Vietnam and Watergate ushered in diminished expectations, architects such as Roche captured hope and newness in their work.

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