

Architecture's Impact

An Interview with A. Eugene Kohn,
Chairman, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF)



EDITORS' NOTE In 1976, along with William Pedersen and Sheldon Fox, who passed away in 2006, A. Eugene Kohn founded KPF with the commitment to providing design and management excellence, matched with technical proficiency and superior client service. Serving as Partner-in-Charge of many of KPF's major domestic and international projects, he has shaped the firm into one of the world's leaders in architecture. Kohn earned B.A. and



A. Eugene Kohn

M.A. degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and served in the U.S. Navy on Active Duty for three years between degrees, for five years on Reserve Duty, and retired as a Lieutenant Commander. He is an Executive Fellow of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University and currently teaches at the Harvard Business School. He helped establish the Harvard International Real Estate Center and has served as a Trustee for the University of Pennsylvania, and is also a founding member of the Wharton Real Estate Center Advisory Board. He has been honored with many awards including most recently the Soane Foundation Honors and the 2010 Alumni Award of Merit by the University of Pennsylvania – the highest university-wide award presented to alumni by Penn.

COMPANY BRIEF Operating as one firm with six global offices, KPF's (www.KPF.com) 550 staff members come from 43 different countries and speak more than 30 languages. The firm's diverse portfolio features over 70 projects certified or pursuing green building certification and comprises corporate, hospitality, academic, medical, research, civic, transportation, residential, and mixed-use projects located in more than 35 countries.

KPF has been one of the strongest players in the industry for many years. What has made the company so successful?

Creative and sensitive design – sensitive to the role that the building will play in the larger context and to the clients' needs and budget. In addition, it's providing excellent service and follow-through. We pride ourselves on being a pleasure to work with over a process that takes anywhere from 3 to 15 years. We have an outstanding team made up of extremely talented and experienced people, committed both to KPF and to serving our clients well.

When we started, we set certain goals and defined the ways we wanted to operate. Those goals have remained consistent over time, and people who have joined the firm and grown up with us have contributed to our goals and reputation.

One of the foremost goals is that we design quality architecture – buildings that contribute to the built environment in a positive way, solve problems, and improve overall quality of life.

Service is also important and we focus on being professional and ethical, offering ideas and unparalleled service to our clients. This means showing respect for our clients, engineers, consultants, and vendors, as well as to our staff.

Additionally, we're not arrogant. We treat the KPF staff very well and give them a chance to grow within the firm, offering them the potential to become partners one day. This has fostered the development of tremendous talent and desire on the part of the younger people to work hard and excel. As a result, we now have 20 partners instead of the three we started with and we'll probably have more soon. We also have a great group of directors and other senior staff – up to 60 people participate in the leadership of the firm and they all feel they have a stake, make a difference, and do great work.

You have always focused on the people who live and work in these buildings. Is that aspect of what you do well understood?

We try to instill in our staff that what we are doing is important for people's quality of life and for the environment. It's one thing for a building to be aesthetically pleasing, but it's another for it to work well and, through its design, achieve the goals set, as well as meet the schedule and budget. We create great places to work, live, learn, and enjoy.

The city benefits from great buildings because they add to the built environment, the street life, and the public realm, and they contribute to the skyline. The internal workings of the building are an integral aspect that must work for the user and meet the goals that the user is trying to achieve.

How critical are your partnerships with developers and if there isn't a common vision, will the partnership work?

No. Great buildings require great clients. No matter how good we are, if the client doesn't want something terrific, it doesn't happen. Most of our

clients, whether they're corporate leaders or developers, want to build something they're proud of, that makes a positive contribution, and that can succeed in every way, including financially.

So it's important that developers care about what they build. If they do, we make it possible for them to realize their vision, and provided the markets cooperate, they will succeed.

Has technology dampened the creativity that used to start with a pencil and paper?

The young people at architectural school today learn architecture on the computer, and at many schools they are not given the opportunity to use their drawing ability to the degree that I did as a young architect. My senior partners and I learned to draw and think while drawing, and to envision what we were drawing in our heads. To this day, I need a pencil to think.

The main enhancement of technology is the speed it brings and the ability to transmit information instantly across the globe, which is very important for clients, architects, and engineers – especially if you work in different countries around the globe on the same project.

Many of the great buildings you see today, however, were built before the computer. So technology is just an addition to the talent you need to be a great architect.

In terms of corporate responsibility, what is your involvement with Columbia?

We are working with Columbia on the Global Professional Practice Project. We have committed a large sum over a five-year period to help them get started on research. The idea is to work on improving the urban environment. Education is extremely important for our populace, so scholarships directed to help educate are important to us. I personally give a scholarship in my family's name to PennDesign at the University of Pennsylvania.

Are developers today gravitating towards green building and how will costs come down in the future?

The sustainable movement is here to stay and there is pressure to be responsible. If you build an office building and don't get a LEED rating of Gold, Silver, or Platinum, many tenants won't think about leasing your space. So as a competitive element, most corporations should embrace environmental concerns and they do. As architects, we need to be strong advocates for sustainability and support our client's efforts to achieve LEED-rated buildings. ●

CENTRA at Metropark in Iselin, New Jersey, one of KPF's green buildings