

## The Impact of Architecture

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

**EDITORS' NOTE** In 1976, along with William Pedersen and Sheldon Fox, A. Eugene Kohn founded Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF) with a commitment to outstanding design, quality of execution, and exceptional client service.

The founding partners wanted to create a firm that would succeed well past their own tenures. With this in mind, they sought talented people who could be as good, and ideally better, than themselves. These employees, mentored by the founders, would be the next leaders at KPF – and hold the responsibility of doing the same for following generations.

Today, Kohn serves as Principal and Chairman of Kohn Pedersen Fox. Holding a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Architecture degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, he served in the U.S. Navy on Active Duty between his academic degrees and after graduation remained in the Reserves for another five years, and then retired as a Lieutenant Commander. He is an Executive Fellow of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University where he teaches, in addition to teaching at Harvard Business School. He helped establish the Harvard Real Estate Center Academic Initiative, is a founding member of the Wharton School Real Estate Center Advisory Board, and has served for over 30 years on the Board of Overseers at PennDesign. Kohn was a trustee for the University of Pennsylvania and was honored with the 2010 Alumni Award of Merit by the University, the highest award presented to alumni. Kohn has also been recognized with the Wharton Real Estate Center's Lifetime Achievement Award; the University of Pennsylvania – PennDesign Dean's Medal of Achievement, the highest honor awarded by the institution; and the Ellis Island Medal of Honor and many others.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Operating as one firm with six global offices, KPF ([kpf.com](http://kpf.com)) is one of the world's premier architecture firms with approximately 600 staff members from 42 different countries, together speaking a collective 40 languages.

The firm's diverse portfolio comprises corporate headquarters, office buildings, hospitality, academic, medical, research, civic, museum, transportation, residential, and mixed-use projects both in the United States and abroad. More than 100 projects of the firm's completed projects are certified, or pursuing, green certification.



A. Eugene Kohn

**When it comes to the key ingredients that make a successful architecture firm, have those changed over the years?**

The basics are still the same. The key ingredients to the success of any project start with the architect and the early work where ideas are generated for the design concept for the building. Architecture is a team effort, and very complex from start to finish. One is taking a blank piece of paper and out of that grows a building that people live in, work in, learn in, etc. It's an

amazing accomplishment for not just architects, but for the clients, engineers, contractors, and materials suppliers – all of the craftsman. There are often well over 1,000 people who work on big buildings including the suppliers – from the architect to somebody who is quarrying the marble in Italy and shipping slabs to the States.

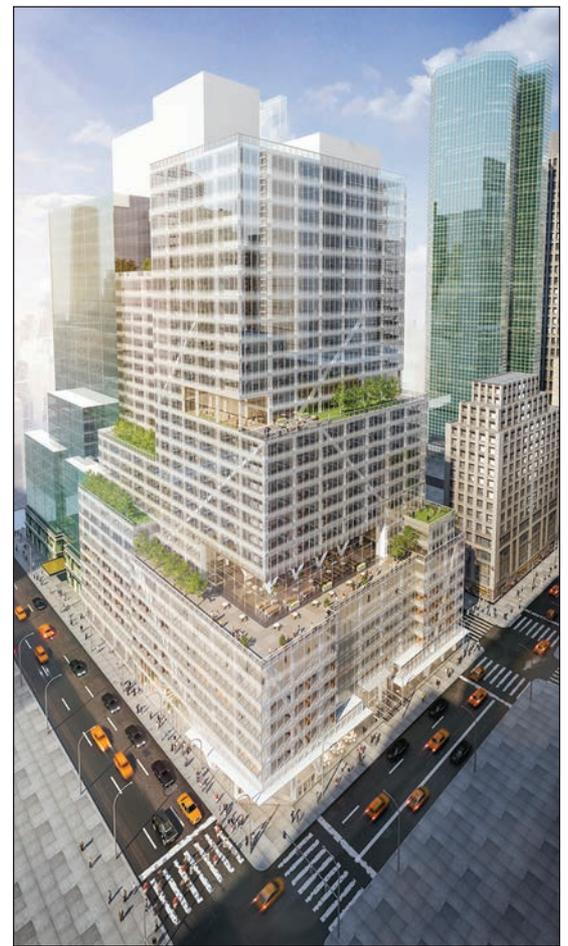
Today, we design and finish our buildings over a period of four to 10 years. Obviously, some can take a longer time, and the more complex ones have a longer time frame. We're currently working on One Vanderbilt next to Grand Central for SL Green, and that project, by the time it's finished, will have been over a 10-year span of work.

Technology has probably had the biggest impact on architecture, in terms of how one does the work, how it's communicated. For instance, we have the ability to collaborate in real-time on any project in a 24/7 period among all of our six global offices in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East – spanning four distinct time zones. Furthermore, our clients have aspirations that are directly impacted by technology – such as integrating Smart Building concepts into their projects – and we are able to directly integrate these digital capabilities into our solutions.

Our practice is global; we design projects all over the world (43 countries) for clients. Technology is fundamental to functionally practice globally.

**At the core though, is this still really a relationship business since you work with the same developers for many years?**

Absolutely, it is a relationship business. The period from design through to construction is reasonably long and it is important that the relationship between architect and client remains strong so that the resulting building is outstanding and successful. A successful building is the result of the collaboration between the



client, team of architects, engineers, contractors, etc. If the relationship is strained, then the product suffers, as does its long-term success. From the architects' point of view, an excellent relationship will pretty much guarantee new projects from the owner, while a poor one will likely lead to disqualification from other projects.

There are many important decisions made along the way and some difficult ones require the relationship to be good. One of the most important aspects of a good relationship between an architect and client is that each understands the other's goals, process, and limitations, and that there is trust between them. The goal in both cases should be an outstanding work of architecture that solves the functional requirements, inspires the users, and meets the clients' schedule and budget as best as one can.

When we started the firm in 1976, nobody knew who the firm was, and our philosophy was to go after clients not projects. We wanted to go after the best clients and get them to know and like us so, when a project did come up, they would think of KPF.

To this day, our clients like and respect us and they feel that way towards me and my partners. Without those relationships, it's very hard to do well – design is a human experience.

**How does KPF pursue work and get selected for new projects?**

There are two ways architects are selected for new work. There is the possibility of winning a design competition, but more often firms are selected based on strong recommendations due to an outstanding reputation with lots of publicity, etc. When relationships are excellent between architect and client, it is a lot easier to get selected by that client for a new project or to be given a strong recommendation to other clients. Another method, and most popular, is to interview a number of firms.

It is also very helpful in pursuing new work to be active in related organizations, such as the Urban Land Institute, and to attend well-respected events, such as MIPIM and MIPIM Asia. I have met many excellent people and maintained many relationships from these organizations that have also led to new business.

**There is much talk about the large-scale trophy buildings today and the success of those, but KPF was built on collaboration. Does this come down to your people?**

I'm a big believer in teamwork. Individuals play key roles in the process, but as part of a team. While certain firms only give credit to the name on the door, teamwork is required to do the project. These are large and complicated projects that require the skills of many different kinds of personnel.

For KPF, we do not play up the individual but rather the team, giving credit to a number of key people who play a role in the project. This concept of teamwork and collaboration builds a spirit among the firm, reduces competition with one another, and strengthens the firm as a whole.

**You put up buildings to stand the test of time but with so much new development in New York, how do older buildings compete?**

There is a saying in real estate that the key to success is location, location, location. If it's an old building in a great location, it still does well. For example, buildings on Central Park, Fifth Avenue, and Park Avenue tend to do very well no matter how mediocre they may be architecturally.

Having a building in an excellent location is also a very good reason for it to be updated. In the case of a good site, if we can't build it any bigger, we would then choose to improve that building, and not tear it down to be rebuilt when there were other circumstances. An example is our project at 280 Park Avenue for SL Green and Vornado, which is in a great location but needed updating. We redid the total lobby and it has leased well.

It's also about an ability to keep a building modern. We're now working on 390 Madison, which is up for a major design award. The impact of major repositioning is more impressive, but also more challenging. It is technically more difficult to remove and replace a structure.

**Are you amazed when you see the work that's been achieved, with something like 390 Madison?**

Originally built in 1953, 390 Madison was a mediocre building that had low floor-to-floor height, with reduced natural light, and was re-clad in 1989. It was not a particularly handsome building. The owner wanted to modernize it but didn't want to tear it down because the building was overbuilt by today's zoning laws by 150,000 square feet. If torn down and built new, it would then have to be reduced in area by 150,000 square feet, and not a good move financially.

We had to correct the floor-to-floor height issue, we had to bring in more light to open up the building to give it a more spacious feel, so we surgically removed floors and relocated them on the top of the building while increasing the floor-to-floor heights, which made the building 40 percent taller. We also created a multiple-story amenity space. One would never know it had been an existing building. Although, it is not really a new building, a major percentage of the structure is new with a totally new exterior curtain wall, which looks exciting and fresh with wonderful space.

**Even with the growth of KPF, you're still a lean organization with 24 partners. With your scope and geographical distribution, how do you handle it?**

We started the firm with three partners who were good friends and professionals, and we wanted to work together. As our firm grew and our work covered a larger geographical area, we needed to add partners. Over 40 years, we have chosen over 26 partners, some not with us today, but it was a process that produced a few partners every two or three years. What is different about these partners compared to the original three founders, is that we, the three of us, chose to be a team together. The founders, and now the



Manhattan's 390 Park Avenue (opposite page); 10+30 Hudson Yards (above); Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles (below)



board, choose the new partners who must learn to work with each other as a team. The key here is that the newer partners need to build strong bonds among themselves, which is not as easy as it was for the original three. Through creating programs and events, we encourage them to work together and build relationships.

We go to China, Japan, Korea, Bangkok, or Europe, etc. multiple times a year for our projects, and we need to be represented by an outstanding professional team led by a partner. We made a move to increase the partnership, which is large, but not that large compared to the size of the firm, in order to be sure we're always represented by senior people who are reliable and responsible. It is important to us and our clients to know that there is a senior partner to service them.

**This year, you will have been a firm for 40 years. There is fulfillment that comes from the relevance of KPF but how important is fostering the next generation to take over?**

From the start, one of the three top visions for the firm was that the firm should continue long after the founding partners are no longer involved. The key is, however, that the partners who take over have the same concern for each other and the staff as the founders did, and that their goal is to maintain a great firm with outstanding personnel. I believe that with the current talented partners and leadership of Jamie von Klemperer, now President, and the enormous talent and experience within the firm, our best years are ahead of us. We have consistently tried to attract excellent talent and to fully prepare the partners to be outstanding professionals and leaders, and well respected in the community. ●