

# 40-Year Watch

**Ford Foundation HQ,  
320 East 43rd Street,  
by Kevin Roche John  
Dinkeloo Associates, 1967  
By Fred Bernstein**

The Ford Foundation's goal, according to its charter, is to "advance human welfare," and it seems to have started with its own building, on 42nd Street between First and Second Avenues. The building was designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates and completed in 1967; in 1998, it became one of the city's few official Post-War landmarks. The building's central feature is its 12-story-high courtyard, which houses an astonishingly lush garden at its base. Offices overlook the garden through windows that slide wide open, allowing workers to breathe foliage-scented air without getting up from their desks. Visitors (to whom the courtyard is open from 10am to 4pm on weekdays) are similarly transported from city to forest.

The building isn't perfect. When it opened, architect and critic Kenneth Frampton noted that the garden, with its narrow walkways, offered little room for socializing. He accused the landscape architect, Dan Kiley, of providing the public with an "anti-agora, invaded by the vegetative processes of nature." And Frampton was largely correct. But even a great building can't do everything, and the shortage of pavement allows the garden to achieve a lushness that is show-stopping when viewed by passersby through the 42nd Street façade, or by Foundation employees from their windows. The "vegetative processes of nature" have rarely been employed to such brilliant effect.

If the garden is the building's *raison d'être*, however, it is far from its only strength. With most of the offices on the west and north sides of the atrium, the building presents itself as a glass wall framed by masonry piers and supported by Cor-Ten

steel girders. But on the 11th and 12th floors, narrow wings (containing executive suites) extend along the south and east sides of the building. Those spaces were arranged by Roche into a two-story-high cornice, giving the building a satisfying crown that feels organic rather than ornamental. In addition, the cornice hides most of the building's glass roof, making the light hitting the garden below seem to appear from out of

nowhere. The building is at once transparent and substantial.

Overall, Roche's building puts to rest the notion that modern buildings lack the gravitas of Classicism. It is a point proven elsewhere by I.M. Pei with the East Wing of the National Gallery (completed in 1978); by Eero Saarinen with Black Rock, the CBS Headquarters (1965); and by Roche himself, with his Center for the Arts at Wesleyan University (1973). More recently, Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects has taken up the mantle.

Their shared idol is Louis Kahn, who used Modernist elements to create powerful, classically proportioned compositions. At Ford, Roche made at least one explicit reference to the master: the triangular brick towers at the corners of the buildings contain stairways and, at each landing, it's possible to look up or down into a triangular void that recalls the triangular stairway of Kahn's Yale Art Gallery.

True, the Ford Foundation building is a bit glitzier than anything by Kahn, but this is Manhattan – specifically, the street that links the United Nations building, the Chrysler Building, and Times Square. By the standards of those neighbors, Roche's creation is restrained. When the building opened, Ada Louise Huxtable, in the *New York Times*, called the building "12 stories of subtle splendor."

To produce that much splendor, Roche needed a wealthy client – in this case, a foundation with an endowment now valued at \$11 billion. No expense was spared to

create New York's most glorious workplace. The office floors are classics of 1960s corporate modernism, with bronze door frames that reach the ceilings, and lots of richly stained wood cabinets. The basement auditorium is a particularly fine period piece, with ashtrays that swivel out from the arms of the leather recliners.

The garden has been replanted since Kiley first installed it 40 years ago, but little else has changed inside the building. On a recent visit, I was sure I'd find something that had been altered infelicitously – but no such (bad) luck. Let's hope that, on this stretch of 42nd Street, the next four decades are equally uneventful.

Fred Bernstein, an *Oculus* contributing editor, studied architecture at Princeton and law at NYU, and writes about both subjects. His work appears regularly in the *New York Times*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *Architectural Record*, and on his own website, [www.twinpiers.com](http://www.twinpiers.com).



**The 12-story Ford Foundation atrium Below: The Ford Foundation's 42nd Street façade**

