



IN PRAISE OF KEVIN ROCHE: THE QUIET ARCHITECT

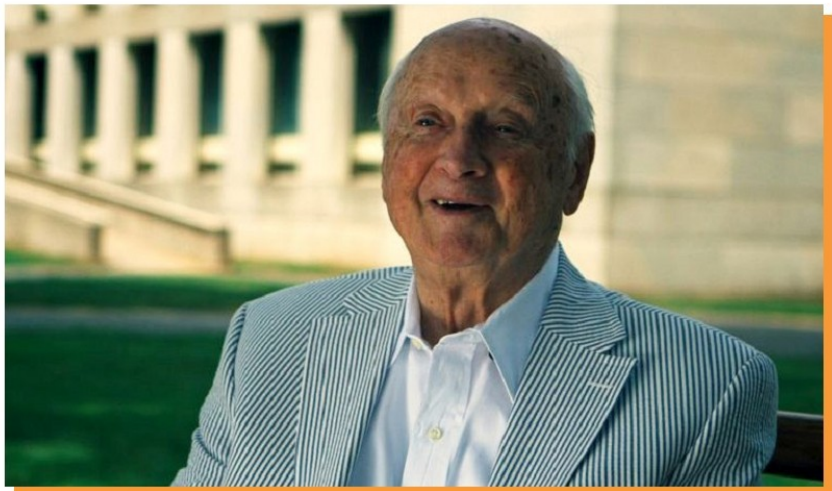
This article was first published on [Commonedge.org](https://www.commonedge.org) and was prompted by attending the screening supported by the Connecticut Architecture Foundation.

The opening scene of the 2017 documentary *Kevin Roche: The Quiet Architect* takes place in Roche's office. It's fitting that this film introduces us to its subject through his practice and not his built work. The camera glides past rolls of drawings, flat files, and stick sets labeled with some of Roche's most memorable achievements: the Ford Foundation building, the Union Carbide headquarters, additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But Roche's first words aren't about architecture; they're about the insanity—as he sees it—of retirement. You're not alive unless your mind is active, he remarks. You're just a vegetable.

Through the film, created by director Mark Noonan, producer John Flahive, and cinematographer Kate McCullough (among many others), we come to know Roche as a workaholic, passionately dedicated to architecture. It's this dimension that Noonan told me most attracted him to a film project suggested by Flahive: "How [Roche has] chosen to live his life, and his almost religious dedication to his work—that is where my curiosity initially resided."

The film portrays Roche's architecture, of course, but that's not necessarily its primary focus. It's really more about a young man who grows up in the 1920s and '30s in a small town at the very heart of Ireland; studies architecture in Dublin at University College (where Noonan would later study architecture); works in Dublin and London; travels to the U.S. to continue his education at the Illinois Institute of Technology under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; realizes he shares almost nothing about his would-be mentor's architectural worldview; and somewhat miraculously lands at the office of Eero Saarinen in 1950, quickly becoming his right-hand apprentice and collaborator. By the time of Saarinen's unexpected death in 1961, Roche was heir apparent of the practice and completed a dozen landmark Saarinen projects, such as the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, the TWA Terminal at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, and Dulles International Airport outside of Washington, D.C. In 1966, he and John Dinkeloo founded their own practice, which initially thrived with many projects for repeat clients. So the documentary is more a film about finding your place in the world—and about how you might practice architecture with a goal of helping other people make their place in the world.

They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Roche was very much like Saarinen when it came to a life consumed by architecture. There are stories about Saarinen's myopic work habits, such as showing



up at the office one morning and wondering where everyone was, only to discover it was Christmas. The film casts Roche in a similar role. He learns of Saarinen's sudden death during a client meeting in New York for CBS's headquarters and decides to go on with it because "that's what Eero would do." He met his future spouse, Jane, at Saarinen's practice, and by the end of the film we learn that, then age 93, Roche had agreed to no longer go to the office on Saturdays, to her delight. (In a development after the film's release, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates announced last July that the firm would pursue no more new work and would focus on completing current projects, winding down the nearly 60-year-old practice. Plans are now under way for the firm to establish a study center foundation within the next year or so that will focus on Roche's contributions to architecture.)

To read the full article, [click here](#).

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Prior to this publication going out, we were informed that Kevin Roche passed away on Friday, March 1st at his home in Guilford.

Kevin has received many honorary awards from universities including the National University of Ireland and was granted a Doctor of Fine Arts from Yale University. He served on the boards of numerous cultural institutions and was the past president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Among his other honors, he was awarded the Academie d'Architecture Grand Gold Medal in 1977, the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1982 and the Gold Medal for Architecture from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1990. In 1993 he received another of architecture's highest honors, the American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal.

We send heartfelt condolences to his family and the many that had the great opportunity to work for and with him, and to all who knew him.

The full obituary is [posted on the firm's website](#).