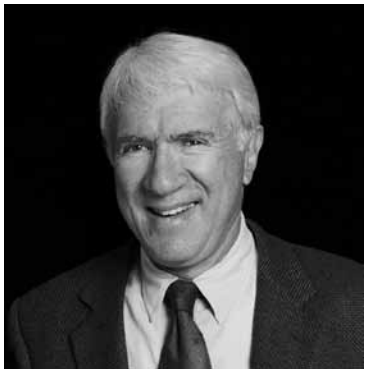
Eugene Kohn
interviewed by
Charles Rattray

The business of skyscrapers



'once people give you advice they want to see it come true – and they become the agents of it becoming true'

Eugene (Gene) Kohn is one of the founders of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, or KPF. As the firm's website puts it, he has been responsible for developing 'a global strategy that has made the firm into a global player'. Some idea of the scale of the operation may be gained from the fact that they are presently working in sixteen *different cities in China and that their completed work there includes the world's third and fourth highest buildings (Shanghai World Financial Center, 2008, at 492 metres and the International Commerce Centre in Hong Kong, 2010, at 484 metres). By comparison, their spiralling Pinnacle building, on site in London just a mile from where I meet Gene Kohn, is a baby at 288 metres, though still comfortably within the world's tallest 100. Such league tables go with the territory. So it seems do jolly nicknames – such as Helter Skelter (for the Pinnacle), Shard, Walkie-Talkie, Cheese Grater and Gherkin – whose kindergarten quality belies the highly competitive market they represent for architects and their clients as well as their users. As a business, KPF itself was successful almost as soon as it opened its doors in 1976. The timing and manner of that beginning are revealing. Kohn's partners were both good friends but chosen for different reasons, in the case of Sheldon Fox because he was, as Kohn told me, 'more of a manager, a fine architect but extremely conservative . . . I thought it would be good if somebody who wasn't like me shared the balance' [with Bill Pedersen]:*

I thought we'd make good decisions, and we did. We started July fourth – which is a key date in the US, a little less important here – and it was a good omen.

Nevertheless it seems odd because 1976 was a time of serious recession in the US and lots of architects were unemployed.

I knew these were troubled times but actually a depression is a good time to start because when things are busy most clients won't have time for you as a new firm. So I sought advice from a number of developers and once people give you advice they want to see it come true – and they become the agents of it becoming true. It's very interesting. I went to seven different potential clients and discussed what they looked for in architects, their goals, what they needed buildings for and by golly they gave me great advice – and within a year most of them gave us work or recommended us for work. Things went very well and within a very short time we had work for ABC Broadcasting Company in New York and it led to a lot of other things like working for people in Chicago doing 333 Wacker Drive and that led to getting Proctor and Gamble headquarters and Goldman Sachs and I guess all these things spiralled and we grew the firm fairly rapidly, but not overly so. We stayed in New York for fourteen years, then we moved to London at the end of the eighties and we did Goldman Sachs' headquarters on Fleet Street, which was our first job in the UK, and then we did a big building – a tower – for the DG Bank [in Frankfurt], great building; both won awards. Then we did Canary Wharf and we got off to a great start here [the London office] with those three projects.

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Chicago: 333 Wacker Drive, 1983

'In New York the height itself was an image that was competed for in and before the 1930s'



London: Goldman Sachs' European Headquarters, 1987

What prompted your move across the Pond?

It so happened that in 1985 I was at a conference and one of the economists who was a guest speaker said the economy was getting bad and, 'if you aren't global by 1990, half of you will be out of business'. Well that didn't sound too good to me. I was determined to avoid that. I talked to my partners and they were less interested but I thought it was critical. So I started the London end and then went to Japan and through a client in the US got a big job – five million square feet [450,000 square metres] first job [the Japan Railways Central Towers in Nagoya, 2000]. And then we went to Hong Kong and now the bulk of our work is in Asia.

Earlier on today I was out at Kew Gardens. I went on the treetop walkway and it occurred to me that I could say I was doing research for this interview, exploring man's desire or instinct to go high and look around (or something). But as a building type, skyscrapers have developed from a time in the early part of the twentieth century when clients wanted to have the tallest, to a stage where the arguments in favour of tall buildings are much more diverse and include issues of energy consumption and sustainability. Is it a building type that has come into its own?

I do take the point that ego and image have played a role in the tall building: not everyone needs to build a tall building but some have one because they want the image. For example, when China was taking over Hong Kong from the British, they thought it could become a new banking centre so they build these two giant towers to put them on the map. In London, of course, Canary Wharf is mainly responsible for the tall buildings in London because it made Londoners realise that you could attract the financial markets and become the financial centre of the world because they could build big floor plates in tall buildings and make it efficient. Had transportation been better early on it could have been an even bigger success story than it is today. So then the City of London opened up the possibility of building tall buildings and that was functional: they wanted to keep the value of land high in the City and not lose all the tenants to Canary Wharf who could pay those rents. But there are people who make tall

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Frankfurt: DZ Bank, 1992

'it seems to me that a tall building wants to stand tall. It's like a human being'



'Five million square feet, first job' : the Japan Railways Central Towers, Nagoya, 2000

buildings because they want to make an image. In New York, the height itself was an image that was competed for in and before the 1930s (in the Singer and Woolworth Buildings) and so they wouldn't announce their heights until the very end. The Chrysler Building spire was pulled out at the last moment. There are lots of stories, but a lot of that had to do with ego. We are still in that stage. The one in Dubai [Burj Khalifa], which is crazy in my opinion, is half a mile high. But who wants to live half a mile high? You're not going to be able to see anything. But that is a powerful statement for Dubai, known all over the world.

The image one has of present-day Florence as a city dominated by Brunelleschi's dome is reminiscent of Canaletto's painting of the Thames and the City of London where St. Paul's towers over the small buildings around it. Although one understands the argument that the large buildings then were of civic importance whereas large buildings now are of relatively private interest, now there is an additional meaning attached to the tall building that is related to the vibrant economy and active business. London has that appearance now, whereas Florence doesn't: it is a different world.

Yes, absolutely. But the church too was interested in vertical building, affecting the skyline.

The problem is that, though one might make the jump to assume that some of the people in these tall office buildings are working on one's pension, the buildings don't have the direct significance to the individual of the church in a medieval city, for example. On the other hand, as a general image for the city it seems to be a positive one: it is hard to imagine an active twenty-first-century city without them.

Oh yes. A good exercise on that is to take an image of a city and then remove all the tall buildings from it. You miss them. People get used to things.

This rings true. I had earlier looked up the Thames from Greenwich, in the south-east of London, and seen the clusters of towers at Canary Wharf and the financial district. To my surprise I read them as modern versions of London's traditional villages – a pair of San Gimignanos, perhaps. We move on to discuss the changing form of the skyscraper: the sculpted Chrysler Building, the classic Modernism of SOM in the 1950s and more recent towers, like pasta shapes, that remind one of Lubetkin's observation that architecture was a minor branch of ornamental pastry cooking. Kohn's comments on the subject recall both Louis Sullivan's demand (in The Tall Building Artistically Considered, *of 1896) that a tall building 'be tall, every inch of it tall' and the Vitruvian analogy between buildings and the human body that Le Corbusier continued by saying (in* When the Cathedrals were White *of 1937) 'Imagine a man undergoing a mysterious disturbance of his organic life: the torso remains normal, but his legs become ten or twenty times too long'.*

Some might be categorised as sculptural but they are still vertical. There are tall buildings you see now where the architects do this [*begins to draw*] ... or this ... or they do some shapes where you wonder how the elevator actually works. I have trouble with those because it seems to me that a tall building wants to stand tall. It's like a human being: you don't want to be hunched over; you want to breathe easily and look up. So why would you want to take

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a tall building and do that or that? Why make it more difficult structurally? But in the recent past, when there was a lot of money being spent on buildings, these became icons, less functional and more sculptural; they became statements.

How does it all work in terms of your role in a team? Clearly there are enormous structural and environmental issues for example, that must loom much larger than in any other building type.

The structure is critical. Obviously keeping a building from falling over is kind of important. For mechanical and electrical services, as you go higher just getting the water up there or dealing with the sewage and the stacks are big issues to think about. I'm not a big fan of the idea of the celebrity architect because it implies that one person or genius has done everything whereas the reality is that it's a total team effort: the client, the architects, the engineers, the M and E consultants, the contractors, the tradesmen. In my opinion, to do a great piece of architecture is one of the hardest things to accomplish. It's unique, every time: you begin with a blank sheet of paper and you're working together with, ultimately, thousands of people to create something. And to make it really fine you've got to make sure that the contractors perform well, the subs and materials suppliers – and avoid every trick in the trade designed to make them more money. Very few professions have exposure to those kinds of series of forces that encompass their work. This requires control of so many things. I don't think clients usually appreciate what it takes to do a building and the press, the critics, sometimes make it sound as if you're doing a painting or sculpture and ignore what it really took to make something functional and deal with cost.

In this economic market how much do you as an architectural practice need to know and understand about the way economics is working in different parts of the world? Do you outsource that information? Do you read the *Financial Times* every day?

I read all those papers and I teach at Harvard Business School as well, so I understand the business mind. I'm very sensitive [to markets] because the economy is going to affect the thinking of our clients and our tenants and the banks and our ability to get these things built. You know, to work on these buildings is fun, to do the sketches – and you can do a book of sketches – but getting them built is what you want. It is the true test of a great architect; the measure of your work is what is built, not all these drawings. Getting it built and having people love it, live in it, work in it, and say 'I just want to be here' is what it's about. So, yes, to answer your question simply, economy, economics and markets are critical to our work. Without good markets you're not going to get buildings. Not on that scale, not of corporate size: maybe a house.

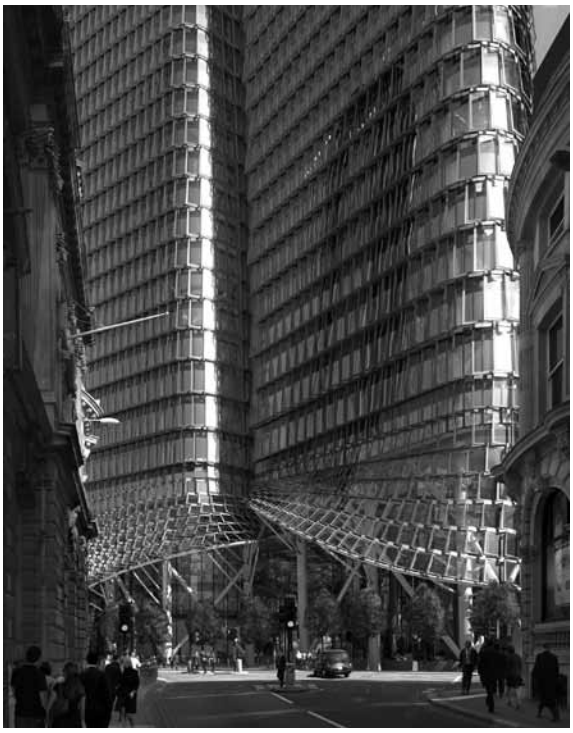
You have a vested interest in keeping in touch with these things ...

... and clients like when you're knowledgeable about the economy, about finance, and you understand that they need to make a return. This isn't about charity. Real estate developers should be, and can be, the most creative of any of us because they do one thing that we



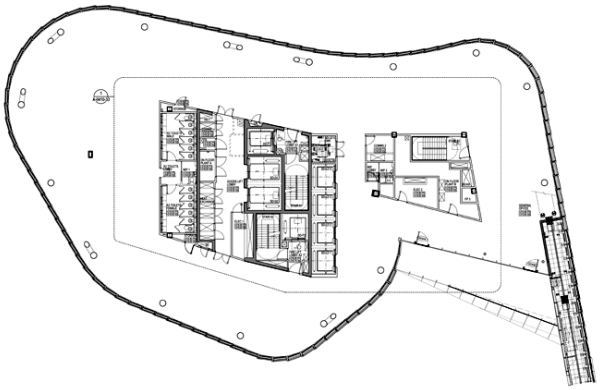
The Pinnacle building, London (in a computer-generated aerial view). At 288 metres high, it will form the apex of an emerging cluster of tall buildings in the City of London

'Without good markets you're not going to get buildings. Not on that scale'



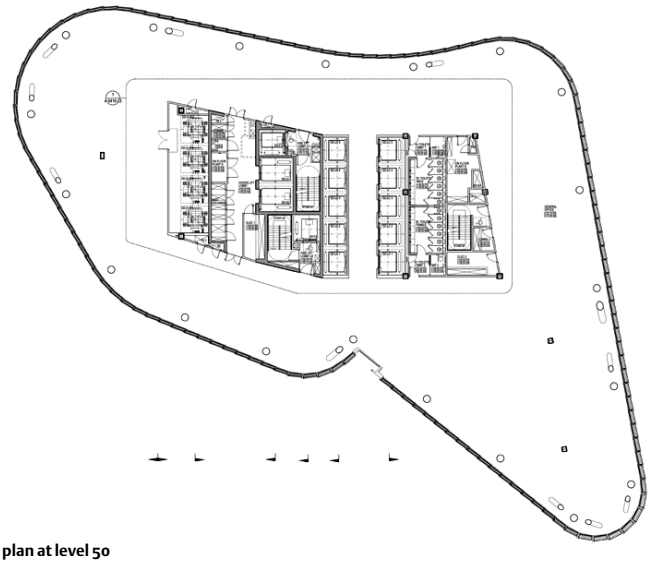
The tower's facade is made of two layers of clear glass: an inner, sealed skin and an outer, uninsulated wind-protecting layer made of overlapping glass panels. The gaps between panels allow air to flow into the cavity and permit operable windows to ventilate the offices

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The Pinnacle building's complex tapered geometry provides a reducing floor area, matched to different uses, as it rises. Plan at level 34 . . .

'Anyone coming out of architecture school thinking that they should be kissed and hugged and thanked is going to be disappointed'



. . . and plan at level 50

don't all do. They look at sites and cities and see a need that they can fulfil by a great project that they want to create. They see it as a place. Most architects don't look around cities like that; they look at buildings to see if they like other architects' work. But the developer is very creative. When they're good they're very good: they do good stuff and they take the risks that most people don't want to take.

You rarely see a tall building as a project in architecture schools. For that matter, in many schools there seems to be an increasing lack of realism about projects and the emphases in projects that are set. From your perspective how does higher education in architecture relate to practice?

I don't think that architecture schools prepare you for what you're going to experience in practice. You could argue that maybe they shouldn't: they should focus on theory and concentrate on being creative and not be bogged down by reality. I teach a leadership course at Harvard Design School because architects don't know how to lead – they think they lead just by drawing – and I've always cared about how you inspire people. So when they come to the office, many times these young people just have no idea even about relationships, how you inspire your own team mates, how you get a client to follow you, or an engineer. So we take time to teach and train every young person who comes in. We get great talent, so it's not hard. They are shocked when they sit in a room with a client who says 'I don't like that bit' and makes marks all over the drawing: they think of the drawing as a work of art. Then there's a case where Woody Allen fought a project near where he lived in Manhattan and he produced a film to convince people not to build this building. Anyone coming out of school thinking that being an architect and creating is the best thing in the world and that they should be kissed and hugged and thanked is going to be disappointed: *they're producing movies to kill your project!* So: we train and expose our young people to the reality of life without discouraging their creative skills or their hopes and prayers and goals for the future. You don't want to hurt them; you still want them to be a little bit starry eyed.

Is the future bright for tall buildings?

I don't see any great pressure in the near future to build a lot of tall buildings either in the UK or the United States. But I do in Asia and to some extent in South America, where Brazil's economy is taking off. But China without question, Korea continually, Singapore, the Philippines, KL [Kuala Lumpur], Djakarta and India – they will all be building tall buildings, and not as status symbols. The reason is that density is required: it's energy-efficient and it deals with transportation. When the World Trade Center was bombed and came down I was asked to speak at a conference on whether there was a future for tall building despite what had happened. One of the architectural critics said that we should not build more than six or seven storeys high, like Paris. So I made a little test for him. I took the two World Trade Towers, which were each 110 storeys, with a big, 400 feet floor plate, and I did a drawing of ten-storey buildings 400 x 400 to see how much they would take up of New York. The towers had taken about an acre each; the lower buildings took thirty acres. Now you tell me what you would rather have: thirty blocks filled with ten-storey buildings, cars and transportation, or these two elegant towers. That's the benefit: tall buildings preserve land – and open space is very important to us.

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