



A. Eugene Kohn (left) with William Pedersen, KPF Vice Chairman, at KPF's New York headquarters (above); the KPF-designed 333 Wacker Drive in Chicago (bottom right)

**EDITORS' NOTE** In 1976, along with William Pedersen and Sheldon (Shelly) Fox, who passed away in 2006, A. Eugene Kohn founded KPF with the commitment of 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, and responsible for many of the firm's new commissions, he has shaped the firm into one of the world's leaders in all aspects of architectural practice. Kohn earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. He 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 has lectured at numerous universities, organizations, and institutions around the world. He is an Executive Fellow of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University—the first architect to be awarded the title—and he currently teaches at the Harvard Business School. He helped establish the Harvard International Real Estate Center and has also served as a Trustee for the University of Pennsylvania, is currently an Overseer for PennDesign, and is a founding member of the Wharton Real Estate Center Advisory Board. He is also a board member of the National Building Museum and Urban Land Institute. In recognition of his accomplishments, he has been honored with many awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award given by the Wharton Real Estate Center in 1997. He was recognized in 1998 with the Ellis Island Medal of Honor; in May of 2005, he was bestowed the Salvadori Award for Excellence in Design; and in May 2008, the Dean's Medal from PennDesign, a seldom bestowed honor. Most recently, he received 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](http://www.KPF.com)) 550 staff members come from 43 different countries and

# Leaders in Architecture

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

*...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.*

## How has leadership played a role in your life?

Leadership has been important in all aspects of my life and I have been very fortunate to have had many opportunities to experience different leadership roles. When I was young, I took public speaking courses in high school and college to build confidence when standing in front of a group.

I learned a very different kind of leadership when I was in the Navy for eight years. I had to see and understand structure and organization, and successfully led 150 sailors at one time. The different ranks, coupled with different assignments, allowed for various opportunities and experiences of leadership. They also allowed me to build relationships with leaders above me as well as with those under my command.

The challenge for me lies in how to inspire people to perform well without ordering or "using your stripes" (rank). My attitude toward leadership has always been to lead through inspiration and the real test of this type of leadership was in starting Kohn Pedersen Fox.

## KPF has been a successful architecture firm for 35 years. How did you get started and what are the founding principles of KPF?

Bill, Shelly, and I felt that we would make a great team, since each of us have different strengths. I had been a designer most of my career, but Bill Pedersen was an even greater design talent. So when we started our firm, Bill took the lead in design. Since then, Bill's projects have won seven out of the firm's eight national AIA Awards and he was honored with the Council of Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH) Lifetime Achievement Award last year. Shelly was an excellent manager, so he headed the management side of things. I provided the overall vision and leadership for the firm, heading the business development efforts and critiquing design. The plan was for the three of us to be involved in leading our own projects, as well as in collaborating with each other. We never stressed individual accomplishments.

With degrees in architecture from the University of Minnesota and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Bill has provided another form of leadership through his groundbreaking designs and his unselfish sharing of credit. Together we worked

to bring out the best in our staff, and have enjoyed watching them become leaders within the firm, as well as representatives of KPF. Professional leadership is the ability to inspire those you lead to perform, to bring out the best in them, to build team spirit, to support each other, and to help develop their skills through training, education, and experience. As a leader you must care for those you lead, and you must have a clear vision of where you want to go and how to accomplish the mission and goals of the firm.

Bill, Shelly, and I also agreed that the most important part of building a great firm was attracting and retaining the best talent.

## What is the culture of the firm?

We wanted to create a firm that would grow and have a long life that would continue after the three of us moved on. With the future in mind, we would provide opportunities for young architects to grow within the firm, to be promoted, and ultimately to have the opportunity to become partners. And since we made that decision, we have attracted the best talent – individuals like Bill Louie, Paul Katz, Jamie von Klemperer, Rob Whitlock, and Jill Lerner who have spent most, if not all, of their careers at KPF. We don't have the same turnover as other firms.

When we founded the firm, while optimistic and somewhat visionary, we never conceived that we would become the global firm that we are today. We have set new standards and influenced the architecture of many, and we look forward with great anticipation and enthusiasm to the future.

Both Bill Pedersen and I are very proud of what the firm has accomplished, making incredible contributions to our built environment and the users of the buildings we have designed. We are, and will remain for the foreseeable future, a firm of three generations, but Paul and Jamie, along with our many partners and key KPF staff, will carry this firm to new heights.

