FORD FOUNDATION BUILDING, East 42nd Street interior consisting of the revolving door vestibule; East 43rd Street interior consisting of the entrance vestibule; A level through eleventh story interiors consisting of the atrium with its terraced garden and pool, extending to the outer surfaces of the glass office walls and glass dining room walls, the outside surfaces of the balcony parapet walls (tenth and eleventh stories) surmounted by railings, the inside surfaces of the window walls at the east and south, and up to and including the inner surface of the skylight; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces including, but not limited to, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, steps, railings, interior columns, doors, and revolving doors; 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, aka 309-325 East 42nd Street and 306-326 East 43rd Street, Manhattan. Built 1963-67; architects Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates (the successor firm to Eero Saarinen Associates).

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1335, Lot 5.

On September 16, 1997, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Ford Foundation Building, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the Ford Foundation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A resolution supporting the designation has been received from Manhattan Community Board No. 6.

Summary

The landscaped atrium of the Ford Foundation Building, built in 1963-67 and designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates, is one of the most successful and admired interior spaces in a modern building created in New York City after World War II. The Ford Foundation, the nation’s largest private foundation, commissioned an independent headquarters building through the inspiration of its then president, Henry Heald, who in his former position at the Illinois Institute of Technology had overseen the construction of the Mies van der Rohe–designed campus, a major monument of the modern movement. The Foundation and its architects offered New York an alternative model for modern office buildings as they created an elegant, transparent glass cube, just twelve stories tall, framed in exposed Cor-Ten weathering steel (also known as controlled-rusting steel) and mahogany-colored South Dakota granite that clads poured concrete piers. On the interior they created a lush landscaped full-height atrium that occupies most of the building, a botanical garden in the heart of Midtown. The interior atrium and its garden relate to the small parks of Tudor City directly to the east. Because the East 43rd Street entrance is placed at the northwest corner of the atrium, and the offices within line the north and west interior walls, visitors entering are immediately aware of the transparent, twelve-story high atrium and its landscaping, as light pours in through the eastern and southern glass walls. Occupying a third of an acre within the twelve-story atrium, the terraced garden rises from East 42nd Street to East 43rd Street. Landscaped by Dan Kiley, who had collaborated with the architects in the office of Eero Saarinen, it is planted with trees, shrubs, vines, and ground-cover plants, and contains a pool of water. Most of the offices rise on the north and west, each office and each employee visible on the other side of the interior glass wall. The intention was to create a working community in which every member was physically aware of every other member. Among the many critics who have extolled its design, Ada Louise Huxtable called the Ford Foundation Building a “civic gesture of beauty and excellence.”
DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Ford Foundation and Its Building

Created in 1936 by automobile pioneer Henry Ford and his son Edsel Ford as a family foundation, the Ford Foundation in its early years devoted its resources largely to aiding local Michigan philanthropies favored by the Ford family, particularly the Henry Ford Hospital and the Edison Institute. In 1950, following the settlement of the estates of the founders who had died several years earlier, the Ford Foundation emerged as the largest foundation in the nation, with assets worth approximately $474 million. The Foundation established itself as a grant-making institution of international scope, and, following a study undertaken by a panel of independent consultants, identified five general areas of interest targeted for its now very significant financial support: peace, democracy, the economy, education, and human relations.

Though the reorganized Foundation established headquarters initially in Pasadena, California, with auxiliary offices in both New York City and Detroit, it closed the Pasadena office in 1953 and consolidated its headquarters in New York. In 1962, the Foundation refocused its energies on new areas: educational affairs, public and economic affairs, international affairs, and the arts and sciences. In 1963, the Ford Foundation bought property on East 42nd and East 43rd Streets for a new headquarters building. That same year, in line with its new focus, the Foundation’s major initiatives included a grant towards the construction of the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.; the establishment of a population program; support for experiments in classroom television; support for the National Educational Television and Radio Center (NET); support for the National Defender Project of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association; and a grant to start a program developing ballet training in the United States. In 1968, a year after the completion of the new building, Ford’s assets totaled $3.7 billion dollars, making it by far the largest foundation in the country.

Private foundations did not often build highly publicized headquarters. Prior to occupying the new building on East 42nd Street, the Ford Foundation had rented space in a Madison Avenue office building. But Henry Heald, who left his position as head of New York University to become president of the foundation in 1956, had formerly been president of the Illinois Institute of Technology whose new campus, built to designs by Mies van der Rohe, become one of the country’s most famous modern monuments. Heald apparently decided that Ford should do something similar. (Heald himself left the Foundation in 1965; McGeorge Bundy, his successor, became the first president to have his office in the new building.)

The Ford Foundation’s approach to its new headquarters office building was immediately recognized as differing from the approach of major corporations, “even,” in one writer’s words, “a Seagram or Lever or CBS. The unyielding laws of economic return in the metropolis dictate against such a desirable circumstance.” The site, according to Kevin Roche, the architect, could have accommodated a building two and a half times larger. It was the rare corporate client that would sacrifice so much rentable area, and turn so much over to a landscaped atrium. When asked why Ford did it, Roche replied “for no reason other than to make a public gesture... A developer could never be persuaded to do it unless there was some significant benefit.” But in this case, he said, it was important “for the relationship of this community with the public.”

New York Times architecture critic Paul Goldberger described the building as “one Ford Foundation philanthropy that, by its very presence on the streetscape, benefits the entire city.” Urban planner Jonathan Barnett called it “a tremendously generous gift to the city.”

Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates

Ford turned to the firm of Eero Saarinen Associates, headed by the surviving partners of Eero Saarinen, one of the leaders of modern architecture. In 1966, the year before the Ford Foundation building’s completion, the firm was renamed Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates. Kevin Roche was the chief designer of the building; John Dinkeloo was responsible for its construction.

The Dublin-born Kevin Roche (b. 1922) received his architectural degree at the School of Architecture at University College, Dublin, in 1945, and after a few years working in Dublin and London came to the United States where he studied with the legendary modern architect Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1951 Roche joined the firm of Saarinen, Saarinen & Associates, which later became Eero Saarinen & Associates. Roche became Saarinen’s principal design associate. John Dinkeloo (1918-1981), architect and engineer,
earned a B. Arch in architectural engineering from the University of Michigan in 1941, and after service in World War II served as head of production for the Chicago office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. He joined Eero Saarinen & Associates in 1950, becoming a partner in 1956. Dinkeloo’s construction innovations included the use of structural neoprene gaskets to seal exterior walls and the introduction of weathering steel of the kind used in the Ford Foundation Building.

Following Saarinen’s death in 1961, Roche, Dinkeloo, and Joseph Lacy continued the firm’s practice. Roche became the firm’s chief designer, while Dinkeloo handled construction. In the early 1960s, Roche completed the design of a dozen unfinished Saarinen projects, including the TWA Flight Center (1956-62) at Kennedy Airport, Dulles International Airport Terminal (1958-62) near Washington, D.C., the Vivian Beaumont Repertory Theater (1961-65) at Lincoln Center, and CBS Headquarters (1961-64) in Midtown Manhattan.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Roche continued working in Saarinen’s romantic modernist vein, rather than in the austere, rigorous modernism championed by Roche’s teacher Mies van der Rohe. The firm’s many buildings in which Saarinen’s influence has been traced include the Oakland Museum (1961-68), the Richard C. Lee High School in New Haven (1961-68), and the Cummins factory in Darlington, England (1963-67). The firm’s work over the decades includes 38 corporate headquarters and eight museums, as well as performing arts centers and other institutional buildings.

John Dinkeloo died in 1981, but the firm continues in practice under the name Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates.

The Ford Foundation Building and its Atrium

The sponsorship of the Ford Foundation created an unusual, perhaps unprecedented, opportunity to design a new kind of Midtown office building. The architects created an elegant, transparent glass cube, just twelve stories tall, framed in exposed Cor-Ten weathering steel and mahogany-colored South Dakota granite that clads poured concrete piers. Inside, they created a lush indoor landscaped atrium occupying most of the building, a botanical garden in the heart of Midtown that leaves the offices facing it on two sides seeming almost an afterthought.

The Foundation acquired a plot much larger than necessary for housing its several hundred employees, and turned over much of the building’s interior for development as an enclosed atrium. Rather than isolating the Foundation staff each from the other, Roche took it as his task “to create a sense of community,” by enabling every staff member to see every other staff member. He did this by creating two shallow, twelve-story high glass-walled tiers of Foundation offices, one on the north side of the atrium and one on the west, arranged so that almost every office has a view across the garden, and so that every office is visible in some measure from every other office. According to Roche: “It’s really very important in that kind of community for each to be aware of the other, for their common aim to be reinforced.”

Since the East 43rd Street entrance is placed at the northwest corner of the atrium, and most of the Foundation offices within line the north and west interior walls, visitors entering are immediately aware of the twelve-story high atrium and its landscaping, as light pours in through the eastern and southern glass walls. Once inside the atrium, visitors find themselves in a terraced garden, enclosed within two uninterrupted walls of glass on the south and the east, and two walls of glass-enclosed Foundation offices rising on the north and west. The effect is one of understatement, elegance, and transparency.

The terraced garden within the atrium was landscaped by Dan Kiley, a landscape architect who had worked with Eero Saarinen. The terraces are planted with trees, shrubs, vines, and ground-cover plants, which surround a pool of water.

The International Style concept of a tall, pristine tower set apart from its neighbors in a large plaza had become enshrined in New York’s 1961 zoning resolution, modeled on such prominent modern towers as Lever House (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1950-52) and the Seagram Building (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1956-58) in Midtown (both are designated New York City Landmarks). Such buildings had a monumental presence but in effect turn away from their urban context. By inverting the concept, and enclosing the plaza, the architects were able to let the Ford Foundation Building -- unusual and monumental though it might be, with a powerfully individual presence -- relate to its immediate surroundings. The landscaped atrium relates to the adjoining small park in Tudor City to the east of the building.
Kevin Roche, in an interview, noted that in 1963 there was no precedent for a modern building with a "garden court," but later, following the example set by the Ford Foundation, including an atrium in an office building had become "commonplace." In his words: "We were attempting to provide a space for the community at large -- almost the first time the public could go into an office building and have a justification for being there. The public can walk through the Ford Foundation, sit down, and enjoy trees and flowers. It is not a lobby for the building. It is a public space. It is a contribution which the Ford Foundation makes to the community." 

The distinction between lobby and atrium is made clear by the location of the building's two major entrances. The entrance to the Ford Foundation offices is located on East 43rd Street, a block with much less traffic than East 42nd Street; here are located a porte-cochere, and, immediately inside the building's entrance, an entrance vestibule to the lobby housing receptionists' desk and elevators to Ford offices. (The lobby is not part of the designated interior space.) The main public entrance to the atrium, on the other hand, is located on the major thoroughfare of East 42nd Street. It is possible to reach the atrium or the lobby from either entrance.

The building was formally dedicated on December 8, 1967. Following its completion (and even before), the Ford Foundation Building has been praised as a major breakthrough in post-World War II modern architecture. Among the many critics who have extolled its design, New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable called the Ford Foundation Building a "civic gesture of beauty and excellence." The building was a winner in 1968 of one of the Sixth Annual Bard Awards for excellence in architecture and urban design. Paul Goldberger, of The New York Times, described the atrium as "one of the city's most spectacular interior spaces.

An English author, noting that Manhattan, unlike London, has a dearth of greenery, speculated that the rarity of plantings city-wide accounted for "the enthusiasm that has greeted the new headquarters," adding that "as architecture it ranks among the finest in New York, but it offers something even more precious: a third of an acre, glass-walled garden, visible from the street and open to the public." Another writer in 1968 found the garden "for its size ... amazingly interesting to explore, with steps, paths, changes of level screened by the foliage."

What appeared to be an extravagant luxury of greenery was defended in several quarters as serving the practical purpose of providing fresh air for the building. Others, however, have dismissed that notion, among them Huxtable, who described the atrium as "one of the city's largest and most spectacular interior spaces as well as a humanized kind of office plan that New York lacks, and could learn from," a "splendid, shimmering Crystal Palace," and "probably one of the most romantic environments ever devised by corporate man."

Description

East 42nd Street revolving door vestibule:
The revolving door vestibule consists of a housing of polished bronze and glass, flanked by single leaf doors of polished bronze and glass set diagonally. The revolving door itself has four large panels, each of polished bronze and glass.

Entrance vestibule on East 43rd Street:
The East 43rd Street entrance vestibule is a glassed-in rectangular space, one story in height, with Cor-Ten weathering steel I-beams at the corners. Two pairs of bronze and glass entrance doors lead in from the street, and two similar pairs lead into the atrium. The floor surface is glazed reddish-brown brick.

Atrium:
Because the garden is terraced in accordance with the topography of the site, the atrium rises eleven stories at the East 43rd Street side (Floors 1-11), but twelve stories at the East 42nd Street side (A level-Floor 11). The designated interior encompasses the entire atrium, extending to the outer surfaces of the glass walls of the Foundation's private offices and glass dining room walls, the outside surfaces of the balcony parapet walls (at the tenth and eleventh stories), and the inside surfaces of the window walls at the east and south. The materials used on the interior are the same as used on the exterior: Cor-Ten weathering steel to frame the glass walls and for horizontal beams; and mahogany-colored South Dakota granite to clad the large piers at the northeast, southeast, and southwest corners, the two narrower piers on the west wall rising in front of the office wall, the narrower pier on the north wall also rising in front of the office wall, and the one freestanding pier at the east side which is tied into the large pier at the southeast corner by a diagonal steel beam. All the piers are poured concrete. Pavers of glazed reddish-brown brick are used inside the atrium. The colors of the Cor-Ten steel, granite, and brick all harmonize with each other.
The south and east walls are composed of a modular grid of very large panes of transparent glass with thin mullions and thicker horizontal beams, both of Cor-Ten steel. These walls rise to a tenth-story catwalk, and eleventh- and twelfth-story glass-enclosed office floors (the uppermost floors on the east wall house the corporate dining room), which appear suspended above the garden. The west and north walls are lined with glass-enclosed offices, rising to balconies and corridors at the tenth and eleventh stories. (The corridors behind the steel and glass balcony parapet walls are excluded from this designation.) On the north wall, the tenth story of offices, recessed beneath the eleventh-story corridor above, appears suspended above the garden. At the first and second stories on the north wall, there are offices behind steel-framed glass walls along the eastern half of the wall, the western half being open for the East 43rd Street entrance. At the second-story level, above the entrance, is a recessed balcony. At the third story, sheltering the balcony, an open steel screen suggestive of a garden trellis, supports plantings. In the northeast corner of the atrium, a block of glass-walled offices rises to the ceiling. From the garden, the offices look like a thin shell enclosing the atrium.

The garden is terraced, with progressive levels leading upwards from East 42nd Street to East 43rd Street, downwards towards the central pool, and upwards again towards the eastern portion of the atrium. It is paved in glazed reddish-brown brick; this brick continues outside the building on both East 42nd and East 43rd Streets, between the building wall and the lot line. A wide staircase on the western side of the atrium proceeds in four terraced levels up to the East 43rd Street entrance; it has a central bronze railing. (To its west, a staircase, not included in this designation, descends to a lower level.) In front of the wide staircase, to the west, is a large, raised brick planter. To the east, close to East 42nd Street, steps lead down to a square brick pool with a central planter (not original). Steps on the eastern edge of the garden rise two levels to an area framed by a section of glass wall that projects out beyond the level of the eastern glass wall of the atrium. Steel I-beams support the base of the window wall at the east. Additional steps lead to other levels of the terraced garden. All steps are of glazed brick and have steel railings. Utilitarian garden lights (not original) are placed along the edges of the brick walks and steps.

The atrium rises to a skylit ceiling composed of interlocking sawtooth sections. The face of each panel is subdivided into transparent glass panes. The effect is suggestive of the ceiling of a greenhouse.

Report prepared by
Anthony W. Robins
Director of Special Projects

NOTES


3. The site had been occupied by the Hospital for Ruptured and Crippled Children, later Beth David Hospital.

4. Figures cited in Nielsen, 78.


12. See Dai Co., 7ff: “As Roche himself maintains, the choice that he made was clear from the beginning and only confirms what is here being postulated. Between the two cultural poles of the field in which his formation took place, Roche had no doubts: the intellectual inventiveness and eclecticism of Saarinen, and not the asceticism of Mies, would end up as his model.”

13. The firm’s museums include additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum, both designated New York City Landmarks.

14. The use of weathering, or controlled-rusting, steel, such a prominent part of the design of the Ford Foundation Building, was pioneered by partner John Dinkeloo, who first used it at the Deere & Co. Administrative Center in Moline, Ill. (designed 1957, completed 1964). The steel is an alloy, with particular proportions of manganese, copper and nickel, which corrodes for a certain amount of time, and then stops. It develops a red-orange color, turning a dark brown color at the completion of the oxidation process. See Suzanne Stephens, “Savvy about Steel, Game with Glass,” in *Progressive Architecture* 55 (Sept 1974), 78-83.

15. Kevin Roche, quoted in Cook and Klotz, 68.


18. Dai Co., 43.


22. Goldberger, 134.


25. See Norval White and Elliot Willensky, *AIA Guide to New York City* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), 122: “The scheme is less extravagant than it seems when the value of the garden as a waste air chamber and thermal buffer is considered.” See also Gueft, 100: “It is the entire crystal pavilion which is air-conditioned, not merely the building, so that the garden courtyard 10 feet high provides an air return volume of more than two-and-a-quarter million cubic feet, refreshing the interiors of the building with clean botanical whiffs which are an unbelievable luxury in the sulphurous environs of New York.”

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this interior the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Ford Foundation Building Interior has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City; and that the interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Ford Foundation Building Interior helps make the Ford Foundation headquarters one of the most distinguished post-World War II buildings of the modern movement in architecture in New York City; that it was built in 1963-67 for the Ford Foundation, the nation’s largest private foundation, and designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates, the successor firm to Eero Saarinen Associates, one of the nation’s premier firms working in the modern style; that the Ford Foundation and its architects, through this new building, offered New York an alternative model for a modern office building, creating an elegant, transparent glass cube enclosing a twelve-story high, lush, indoor landscaped atrium visible from outside; that the architects, in an approach unusual for modern movement buildings in the 1960s, carefully considered the context in planning the building’s design, relating the interior atrium and its garden to the small parks of Tudor City directly to the east; that, occupying a third of an acre within the twelve-story atrium, the terraced garden, rising from East 42nd Street to East 43rd Street, was landscaped by Dan Kiley, a former collaborator of Eero Saarinen’s; that because the East 43rd Street entrance is placed at the northwest corner of the atrium, and the offices within line the north and west interior walls, visitors entering are immediately aware of the transparent, twelve-story high atrium and its landscaping, as light pours in through the eastern and southern glass walls; that the twelve-story glass walls of offices rising on the northern and western walls intentionally create a working community in which every member is physically aware of every other member, with the atrium as central focus; and that the Ford Foundation Building with its interior is recognized as one of the most successful and admired modern buildings to emerge in New York City after World War II.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Ford Foundation Building, East 42nd Street interior consisting of the revolving door vestibule; East 43rd Street interior consisting of the entrance vestibule; A level through eleventh story interiors consisting of the atrium with its terraced garden and pool, extending to the outer surfaces of the glass office walls and glass dining room walls, the outside surfaces of the balcony parapet walls (tenth and eleventh stories) surmounted by railings, the inside surfaces of the window walls at the east and south, and up to and including the inner surface of the skylight; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces including, but not limited to, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, steps, railings, interior columns, doors, and revolving doors; 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, aka 309-325 East 42nd Street and 306-326 East 43rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Manhattan Tax Map Block 1335, Lot 5, as its Landmark Site.
Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, aka 309-325 East 42nd Street and 306-326 East 43rd Street, Manhattan.

Photo: Carl Forster
Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, Manhattan.

View of south wall  Photo: Carl Forster
Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, Manhattan
View of north wall  Photo: Carl Forster
Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, Manhattan
View of skylight  Photo: Carl Forster

Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, Manhattan
View of upper floors  Photo: Carl Forster
Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, Manhattan
View of offices  Photo: Carl Forster
North-south section, showing atrium, looking west

Interior atrium, A level and first story level

FORD FOUNDATION BUILDING, INTERIOR ATRIUM

DESIGNATED OCTOBER 21, 1997
Ford Foundation Building interior, 321 East 42nd Street and 320 East 43rd Street, aka 309-325 East 42nd Street and 306-326 East 43rd Street, Manhattan.
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1335, Lot 5.
Source: New York City Department of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map
Ford Foundation Building interior
Source: Sanborn, Manhattan Land Book (1996-97), pl. 74