

NEW YORK



Photo by Simon Luethi/Ford Foundation

CRITICAL EYE

Building your values

The Ford Foundation's restoration of its landmark building makes a bold statement about what architecture owes the public today

By **Alexandra Lange** | Nov 20, 2018, 8:56am EST

When the Ford Foundation's 12 stories of mahogany-colored granite, Cor-Ten steel, and transparent glass opened on 42nd Street in 1967, urban observers saw it as a gift.

Designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates with Dan Kiley as landscape architect, the building—comprising offices for the foundation's several hundred employees, all wrapping a vertical indoor botanical garden—could have been two and a half times larger as of right.

The Ford Foundation didn't have to open its garden atrium to the public, either. What was considered so benevolent five decades ago, however, doesn't seem like gift enough in 2018. Good design, quality materials. Public-facing design, quality materials: these remain elements that we praise but, as critics of the time noted, they should be the minimum. For a philanthropic organization like the Ford Foundation, the challenge was to apply those 21st-century values to a monument of the 20th century.

Challenged with health and safety upgrades to a building [landmarked in 1997](#), the foundation rose to the challenge of aligning its architecture with its values. It's worth looking at what it has done—the building reopened in mid-November for staff, and to the public in mid-December—and not just because we love the building. The reopening points to a conversation more organizations need to be having about how they can serve both

employees and their mission better—not just through grants and programming, but through their physical space.

Critics of the time understood the Ford Foundation building as a statement of values. The title of *Architectural Record's* [February 1968 story](#) is “Innovation and Symbolism of 42nd Street.” Paul Goldberger wrote that the building was “one Ford Foundation philanthropy that, by its very presence on the streetscape, benefits the entire city.” The money quote in Ada Louise Huxtable’s [glowing review](#) was, “Ford will never give most New Yorkers anything except this civic gesture of beauty and excellence, and that is a grant of some importance in a world where spirit and soul are deadened by the speculative cheapness of the environment.”

By the late 1960s, Huxtable had already soured on the model of the corporate skyscraper set in a public plaza as a “status” structure. What had seemed novel at Lever House in 1952, and generous at the Seagram Building in 1958, was now—thanks to a change in New York City zoning law in 1961—commonplace and chaotic. It made sense that the Ford Foundation should do more for the city than Lever, Seagram, or the Ford Motor Company itself; its grant-making areas at the time included public and economic affairs as well as the arts and sciences. (Edsel Ford created the foundation in 1936, and its activities were initially supported by large holdings of Ford stock; the last of that was sold in 1974.) The Ford Foundation building preserved the street line and, “in a virtual reversal of current practice, [the architect] put the building around the plaza, instead of the plaza around the building.” So new was the concept that the indoor garden wasn’t initially classified as an atrium by the city—[specific zoning](#) offering additional floor area for covered public spaces would come in response.

While the atrium improved corporate style, the president of the country’s largest foundation also partook of the architectural status markers of the CEO. His suite was at the top, practically a glass house unto itself, overlooking both the garden and the glass-walled offices of his employees.

When [I wrote about the proposed renovation in 2016](#), the foundation’s current, design-loving president Darren Walker made it clear that changes needed to start from the top. Meanwhile, the building needed to be brought up to code by 2019 for fire safety and accessibility. Walker saw that those requirements offered an opportunity to do more.

Symbolically, the president’s office had to be the first thing to go. “The building is very hierarchical, very 1960s,” Walker [told me](#). “The best offices are distributed to the most senior executives and that is no longer appropriate for a social justice foundation. We will have very few offices and much greater transparency and openness.”

His new office is half the size, on a lower floor, adjacent to his coworkers. The foundation has reduced its staff’s footprint within the building, moving to open-plan cubicles (with adjustable desks), freeing up space up top for meetings and conferences and the lowest floors for a visitor center, an art gallery, and rented office space.

The team from Gensler, led by principal Madeline Burke-Vigeland, worked with the foundation to translate social justice into physical space: Rechristened the [Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice](#), the building now houses three additional organizations, who have signed long-term leases for the lower floors, and offers 54,000 square feet of event space that outside social justice groups can reserve for free (they have to cover their own AV costs and catering). Where once the garden was the limit of the public’s entrée, now there are multiple ways to invite yourself in.

A hall of offices that ran along the west side of the garden now allows people in wheelchairs entry to the building's elevators, without going outside and around the block, as they had to before. Those elevators can take them down to the sumptuous auditorium, [with its restored Sheila Hicks tapestry](#), or up to the offices and conference rooms, ditto. Walker's modern baronial office can be yours for a day. Who wouldn't want to plot a better world with a view of the East River and Tudor City Park's treetops?

Private companies are still playing with the architectural language of the Ford Foundation and its atriumed brethren. [Amazon's Spheres](#) are the offspring of Buckminster Fuller and the Biosphere. BIG and Thomas Heatherwick's [tented Google HQ](#) mixes Frei Otto with [BuroLandschaft](#) ("office landscape"), two [references born of hippie culture and 1960s environmentalism](#) now at the bidding of big business. But the former are only accessible by appointment, the latter likely viewable only from the bikeway—limited generosity.

They never achieved that feeling on 42nd Street. Despite the fact that the atrium was open to all, I frequently encountered members of the public who were, in fact, waiting for the modern-day equivalent of an engraved invitation to go inside. They never thought to try the door because there was a door at all.



Photo by Simon Luethi/Ford Foundation

In addition to that psychological barrier, the Ford Foundation had a physical access problem: The modernist architect and landscape architect often used steps as structure. Absent a ceiling, the floor offered architects the opportunity to mold people's paths around a landscape. Kiley, like [M. Paul Friedberg](#), [Lawrence Halprin](#), [Philip Johnson](#), and [Sasaki](#), made planted space in cities through steps, spaces which now read as barriers to entry and enjoyment.

Faced with six levels of planted terraces and right angles, Gensler presented a series of compromises to incorporate accessibility into the garden's plan. Along the front side, facing 42nd Street, a narrow path leads to a newly installed elevator. Along the back, a sloped surface replaces a flat path leading to a handful of steps. While a wheelchair user can't get all the way down to the water feature at the garden's center, they can at least circumnavigate its outer edge.

It was the lift that initially gave me the most pause. Elevators are chunky and, except for those in [John Portman's atriums](#), generally not part of the fun. A machine in the garden

seemed like an invasion, and remains potentially little-used, but I think client and designer were right to push once they added multisensory inducements to the architectural sights.

The planted bed now reachable by that half-floor lift includes a touch-and-smell garden. The square fountain at the center, returned to its original mirror-like stillness, has an invisible recirculation system that produces the sound of running water. The sound will also drown out some city noise, centering the experience under the trees.

The accessibility retrofit couldn't be better timed given the imminent opening of Heatherwick's Vessel on the opposite side of Manhattan. We have learned a few lessons in the subsequent decades about making spaces for the many. [The Vessel symbolizes refusing to learn those lessons](#). If you are learning from the 1960s, why not [a modernist ramp](#) rather than modernist stairs?

The final element of the renovation was the garden itself. In order to install the building's first sprinkler system, the hung ceilings need to be opened up—and there was asbestos insulation inside, sprayed on the steel structure. Asbestos abatement required the removal of all living things. Although [Dan Kiley is a legend](#), not all of his landscapes have aged well.

“Dan Kiley was the first person to say this is all a big experiment,” says the perfectly named [Raymond Jungles](#), the Miami-based landscape architect tasked with uncovering Kiley's original intentions. “Kiley's gardens are normally very structured, very architectural. Here, the order was there but it was camouflaged.

“His intention here was to create a temperate woodland setting inside the building that would relate to Tudor Park and the trees outside,” Jungles continues. “If you look at the original photos of the place, he nailed it.” But then, trees died. Plants died and were replaced with “mall plants.” The grow lights burned out and were never replaced. Kiley brought eucalyptus from California that he thought would grow 80 feet tall, brushing the skylight of the atrium. That never happened.

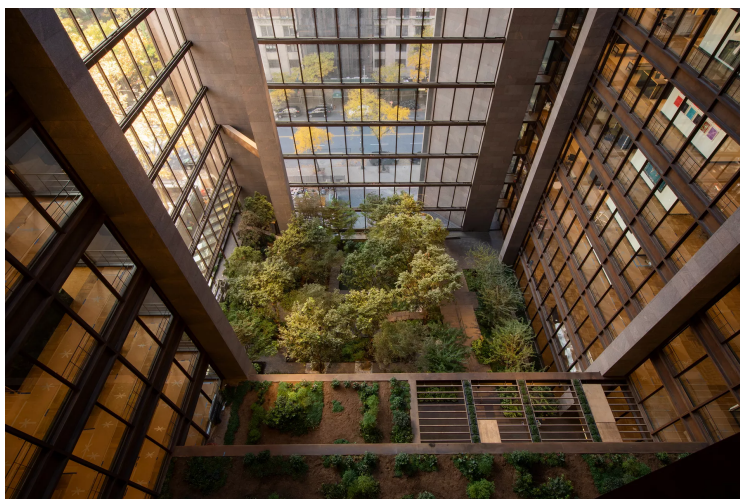


Photo by Simon Luethi/Ford Foundation

Jungles interviewed [Joe Karr](#), once the 25-year-old project architect for both Ford and the Oakland Museum, and collaborated with [SiteWorks](#) and Francisca Coelho, former vice president of glasshouses and exhibitions at the New York Botanical Garden, to choose new plants that would preserve the look Kiley was going for, but love the subtropical indoor temperatures.

Magnolias were out, and Ficus amstel kings in, providing dark foliage. Shady lady black olives instead of the eucalyptus, but with similar small, dusty leaves. The effect of the plants now, even as they acclimate, is magical. It feels more like being in a glen; you can see the Cor-Ten verticals of the building's walls around you, but still feel surrounded by green. The space between the tree canopy and the groundcover has been opened up, the fountain has lost its silly central pot and, for now, its carpet of pennies. It is calmer, the palette gray-green and subtle, not bright and crowded.

The idea of being able to look through now echoes the transparency of the architecture. Above you, the sawtooth skylight, 12 stories up, is as clean as it will ever be. To the east, kids playing at the Tudor City playground; to the south, commuters on 42nd. From the upper floors, looking north, you can see clear through the building now that the private offices are gone.

Going forward, the Ford Foundation building will make more than symbolic gestures to the public. The architecture is walking the walk, and rolling the ramp. A landmark can rise to meet the challenges of the future, and not get left behind. ■

CRITICAL EYE | FROM CURBED

A museum grows in Houston

CRITICAL EYE

Is America's densest city ready to make room?

CRITICAL EYE | FROM CURBED

Knolling your block

[View all stories in Critical Eye](#)