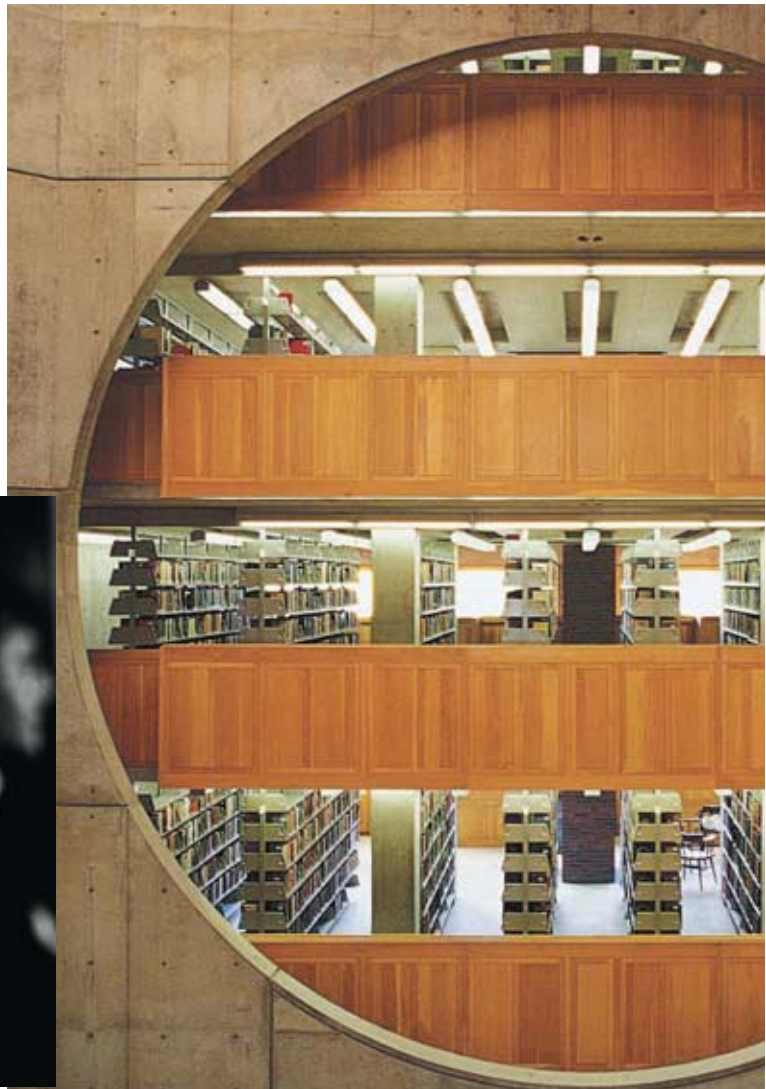


Our Architect



Thirty-five years ago this spring, the Academy broke ground for its new library, designed by one of the greatest architects of the 20th century, Louis Kahn—now the subject of a compelling new documentary directed by his son.

On these pages, architectural historian **Kathleen James-Chakraborty '78** analyzes the significance of a building considered among Kahn's very finest; former Academy librarian **Rodney Armstrong '68 (Hon.)** recalls how Kahn came to design the library; and filmmaker **Nathaniel Kahn** discusses *My Architect*.

ROBERT LAUTMAN; ABOVE: BILL TRUSLOW; RIGHT: STEVE ROSENTHAL; FAR RIGHT



In the words of architectural historian Vincent Scully, Louis Isadore Kahn was “a supremely gifted architect. That fact is becoming more apparent every passing year. His work has a presence, an aura, unmatched by any other architect of the present day.” Born in Estonia in 1901, Kahn immigrated to Philadelphia with his family at the age of 4, where, according to his son, filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn, “he lived in profound poverty.” His early talents as an artist won him a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied architecture. Following his graduation in 1924, he worked as a draftsman and head designer for several Philadelphia firms. Says his son, “Throughout the 1930s and 1940s he struggled to define himself artistically and to obtain commissions—a task he found difficult, due both to the Great Depression and to his outsider position as a Jew working in a Protestant gentleman’s profession.” In the late 1940s, he began teaching, first at Yale and then later at Penn. It was during this period that Kahn found his mature style and began work on a series of remarkable buildings that made his reputation, including the Salk Institute in La Jolla, CA; the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India; and perhaps his crowning work, the Capital Complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

BY KATHLEEN JAMES-CHAKRABORTY '78

In 1965, the year he was offered the commission to design the Phillips Exeter Academy library, Louis Kahn was among the most highly regarded of American architects, if not the most widely known. Only Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, both a generation older than Kahn, were held in the same esteem. The two German-born former directors of the Bauhaus passed away in 1969. With them went the profession’s strongest tie to the classic modernism that Kahn’s mature work so convincingly challenged.



By the time of their deaths, the three American commissions that would cement Kahn’s reputation as their equal had all entered his office: not only the Academy library, but also the Kimbell Art Museum, in Fort Worth, TX (“the greatest American building of the second half of the 20th century,” according to *Boston Globe* architecture critic Robert Campbell), and the British Art Center at Yale University in New Haven, CT (an “enduring monument,” according to Vincent Scully).

“I don’t want a client who knows exactly what it is he wants,” architect Louis Kahn (opposite page) once remarked. “I want a client who knows what he aspires to.” In Phillips Exeter, Kahn found just such a client, and the result was a building in which Kahn balanced the palpable heft of brick and concrete with the immaterial splendor of light to achieve an enduring poetry.

In these three spaces for learning and contemplation, Kahn gave architectural form to his belief in the importance of education and the opportunities it afforded. Clearly legible architectural order structured the experience of environments in which one was free to choose what books to read, which pictures to study and what ideas to develop about them. The clarity of this order and of the freedom it nonetheless offered proved to have enormous appeal at a time when few American institutions, including the architectural profession, seemed capable of addressing widespread social and especially urban unrest.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of great turmoil in the United States, as in much of the rest of the

Lou Who?

The story of how Louis Kahn came to design the Academy library is a tale with many heroes.

BY RODNEY ARMSTRONG '68 (HON.)

When I arrived at Exeter in 1950, it was with the promise that I was to lead the effort of designing a new library for the Academy.

The Exeter I encountered was definitely not a St. Grottlesex school. It was vaguely Congre-

Our new principal was dismayed by what he saw and asked me for an explanation, the gist of which was that it was a faculty committee effort with the aid of the second-largest architectural firm north of Portland.

When Dick Day learned that this same firm was involved with a renovation of the gymnasium, he fired the architect and eventually Exeter got a sports palace designed by Kallman & McKinnell, the same firm that designed Boston's Government Center. (I was always grateful for the sports palace, as no matter how palatial our plan for the new library became, it appeared modest by contrast.) When Principal Day learned that I was

library. We were to receive and consider suggestions from trustees, colleagues, alumni and friends, and to travel anywhere, here and abroad, as we thought best, to look at buildings. Principal Day was no piker, but a hero. I had also blown about eight years of planning.

At the first meeting of our small committee, Elliot Fish of the modern languages department startled us by saying he didn't know why we were going through such a lengthy procedure when he could tell us right then and there who our choice would be. Silence was followed by dubious murmurs and calls of "Who?"

"Why Lou Kahn, of course," he replied. "Lou who?" we chorused.

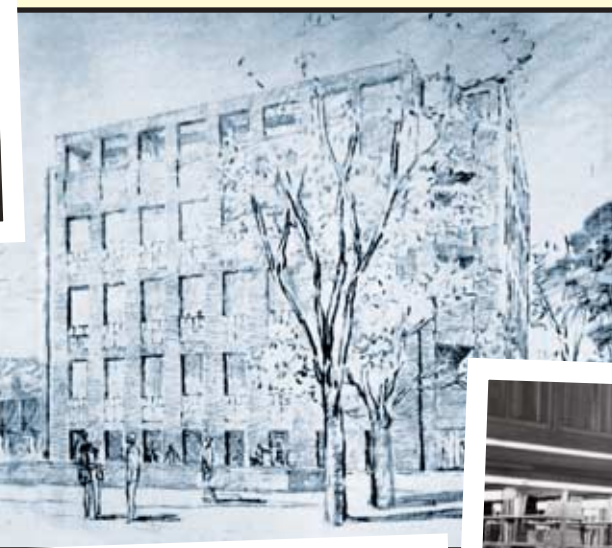
Among the many concerned letters, visits and telephone calls our committee received were two calls to me from Dr. Jonas Salk, the developer of the polio vaccine and the father of Peter Salk '61, who had been a student in the dormitory where I lived. Jonas Salk insisted I visit the Salk Insti-



gational, but its god was academic achievement. The faculty was formidable, with an exceptionally strong history department determined to get a library appropriate to support their efforts. It would replace the charming but small Davis Library, which had been designed by Ralph Adams Cram and built in 1912 for a school of just 500 students. The history department's representative on the library committee was Albert Ganley, who heroically stuck with us to dedication day.

Eventually, after a number of years and strenuous collaborative efforts, our trustees appointed an architect, one who was responsible for the libraries at Barnard, Amherst and West Point. The trustees' instructions were as follows: to anticipate the Academy's needs for the next 25 years and to design an exterior that would "blend in with our beautiful Georgian buildings." The architect was nice, capable, attentive.

As we became involved with final working drawings, Exeter got a new principal: Richard Ward Day, an ex-marine captain as well as an educator. By chance, Dick Day and I met one day on a school path in front of a newly constructed dormitory, which looked like a Howard Johnson motel that had lost its way



way down the road with plans for the new library, he spent an afternoon reviewing the plans. When he had finished, he asked my opinion. I responded that the plans met the program requirements and the trustees' request that the building blend in with the adjacent structures. Dick Day looked me in the eye and asked me if I liked it. I had to respond that it was not my taste. He replied that he was firing the architect and appointing me chairman of a faculty committee, whose members were to be suggested by me, to rewrite the program and to propose "the outstanding contemporary architect in the world" to design Exeter's new



A 1967 sketch (center) by Louis Kahn showing his plans for the new library. Construction began in April 1969 and was completed two years later. On November 16, 1971, classes were canceled so that students and faculty (including Principal Dick Day, center) could transfer some 60,000 books out of the old library and into the new one.

tute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, CA, which had been designed by Louis Kahn. When I arrived, Jonas spent hours showing me around. His love for the building was palpable. "No other architect could have done this, Rodney," he told me. I didn't have to be convinced; I thought the Salk Institute was glorious.

There followed many other trips. Our committee compiled a list of architects to be interviewed

DRAWING: THE EXETER BULLETIN; PHOTOS: PEA ARCHIVES

at their offices after they had considered our written program and other materials about Exeter. All wanted the commission.

With months flying by, the time came when our list of final choices had to be submitted to the principal and the trustees. It was a time of great anxiety: our committee was unanimous in their recommendation of Kahn above all others, yet Kahn had so few buildings constructed compared to the other architects on our list. But we were sure, so sure.

Enter another hero. Our trustees, having placed such trust in a faculty committee, had also appointed an adviser on buildings and grounds: Nelson W. Aldrich of Boston, an architect of considerable practice, and a friend of many of the trustees and of myself. Nelly came down firmly for our recommendation. We were home free. Lou Kahn received his commission from the trustees in November 1965, and made his first visit to Exeter in January 1966. Ground-breaking began exactly 35 years ago, in April 1969, and the building was completed approximately two years later.

In conclusion I wish to express my gratitude to Lou Kahn: for the education he so generously gave me over the course of the library's design and construction, and for what he did for Exeter, its students and faculty. His library fulfilled our dreams and hopes, and did indeed shift the center of our school world. Immodestly, I add that it is the greatest secondary school library, here or abroad.

Another hero is Jacquelyn Thomas '62, '69 (Hon.), who succeeded me as Exeter's librarian in 1975 and who has fiercely and successfully maintained the integrity of Kahn's library through the necessary replacements and refreshments of the ensuing years. My only regret? That the Academy's coffers did not permit the landscaping outside which would have completed Kahn's dream for Exeter.

Rodney Armstrong '68 (Hon.) served as the Academy's librarian for 25 years. This article is adapted from a talk he gave at a symposium on Kahn's life and work held earlier this year at Yale University.



world. Kahn retained an immigrant's optimistic faith in his adopted country, but he was well aware of the increasing poverty and anger of Philadelphia's most vulnerable residents. Nor could he ignore the often noisy antiwar demonstrations that took place on the University of Pennsylvania campus, literally just under the windows of his studio, in which large numbers of his own students participated. His increasingly prophetic utterances addressed neither issue directly, however.

Instead it was Kahn's buildings that spoke about his continued faith in a common humanity. He applied the lessons he had learned abroad about light, construction and form to civic structures for a society whose faith in the industrial technology and expressive abstraction that had denoted modernity for a generation now appeared almost exhausted. The library and two museums offered a serene sense of permanence that appeared to many to be far more convincing than the emphasis many avant-garde architects were placing on flux.

Many Awards, But Few Commissions

Kahn's success in creating celebrated antidotes to urban and social instability did not translate, however, into much American

(Left) Armstrong and his fellow library committee members, faculty members Albert Ganley and Elliot Fish, wrote that the "architect of the new building should remember that the emphasis should not be on housing books, but on housing readers using books. [We] seek an environment that would encourage and insure the pleasure of reading and study." (Below) Kahn's genius is in the geometry, simple elemental shapes that he used to great effect, including the massive cross beams at the very top of Rockefeller Hall, which are 18 inches thick, 16 feet tall and contain 87 tons of concrete.



work. When building committees lacked a clear understanding of what they wanted, he was seldom able to lead them to a conclusion upon which they could agree. Exeter, however—like the Kimbell and the British Art Center—was backed by a single client representative who was deeply

engaged in framing the question and encouraging Kahn to develop a compelling solution. Examining his success at Exeter illuminates the character of Kahn's practice and the importance to it of an enlightened and determined patron.

Several types of architectural offices competed successfully with Kahn's. Since the turn of the century, a prestigious handful of large American architectural offices had been run along much the same lines as the corporations for whom they executed most of their work.

Smaller, atelier practices typically focused, as Kahn's did, upon the design sensibility of a single man. These included Marcel Breuer, Philip Johnson and I.M. Pei, as well as Edward Larrabee Barnes, John Johansen and Paul Rudolph. All of these men were, by their own admission, less likely than Kahn to produce pure poetry, but they were far more adept at dealing with the mixture of client egos, complex programs and realistic budgets that confront all architects. Johnson was even

generous enough to recommend Kahn to his own potential clients.

Time after time Kahn lost commissions when he refused to settle on a design or when the conclusion he did finally reach came in well over budget. Between 1957, when he began work on the Richards Medical Building at the University of Pennsylvania, and 1965, when he completed work on the Salk Institute, Kahn's office completed only seven other permanent buildings in the United States. His new status was marked more by honorary degrees and awards than buildings, including the medal of honor from the Danish Architectural Association. Gold medals from the American Institute of Architects (1971), the Royal Institute of British Architects (1972) and the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1973) followed. These honors proved superfluous, though, when it came to getting work. Between 1966 and his death in 1974, Kahn erected only eight more American buildings.

Projects that failed to reach fruition included the mixture of private houses, academic buildings, religious buildings (Christian as well as Jewish) and urban redevelopment projects typical for an American architect of the period with an international reputation. Universities throughout the country flirted with the potential rewards associated with acquiring a Kahn building before becoming convinced that the expense coupled with the difficulty of dealing with an architect often viewed as impractical were not worth the potential prestige and beauty.

A Committed Collaboration

Like the Kimbell Museum and the British Art Center, Exeter possessed both the determination and the patience to collaborate with Kahn. In each building, Kahn's idealized diagrams of function create places for individual thought within a communal setting. The rigorous order of their bay systems is warmed by natural light and by the insertion into their brick and concrete frames of metal, stone and wood. Here Kahn found a way of recalling the serenity and grandeur of Beaux-Arts monuments like Pennsylvania Station, without relying on specific historical precedents or on ornament that masked attention to structure.

While the Exeter library is widely understood to herald a revival of neoclassical principles, it is also richly informed by lessons Kahn had learned in Africa and was continuing to absorb from the trips to South Asia that were interleaved with the building's design.

The devices with which he had seen Africans shading their buildings from tropical light, as well as the balance of formal order and fluid function he had admired in India

The Making of 'My Architect'

BY BETH BROSNAN

Filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn remembers well the first time he laid eyes on the Academy library. "I must have been 12 or 13," he recalls, "and it was just an amazing experience. To see the outside and then step inside—there's a wonderful surprise to it, a remarkable power."

Nathaniel Kahn knows better than most that few things in life—books, buildings, but most especially people—can be judged by their outward appearances. His father, Louis Kahn, created some of the most powerful and transcendent buildings of the 20th century. But the exquisite harmony found in his architecture was largely lacking from his personal life. Married for more than 40 years, Louis Kahn also maintained

long-term relationships with two other women, and had a child with each of them. The three families all lived within several miles of one another, but the first time they found themselves all under the same roof was at Kahn's funeral.

Kahn's youngest child and only son, Nathaniel was just 11 when his father died in 1974. In *My Architect: A Son's Journey*, Nathaniel, now 41, documents his search for



Just 11 when his father died, filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn (above) made *My Architect* in order to better understand "the man who left me with so many questions."

"the man who left me with so many questions." The result is an extraordinarily moving portrait of an extraordinarily complex and charismatic man.

"I have never seen or read a more penetrating account of the inner life of an architect—or of architecture itself—than that presented in this movie," wrote *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp of *My Architect*. But the film's appeal derives not only from the beauty of Louis Kahn's buildings, but also from the generosity of a son's efforts to know, understand and ultimately accept his father—in all his roles and many contradictions. "Not only is *My Architect* the best documentary in a vintage season for nonfiction films," noted Carrie Rickey, film critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, "it's also one of the best films of the year."

Since its theatrical release late last year, *My Architect* has earned an Academy Award nomination and enjoyed the kind of widespread popularity unusual for a documentary film, playing in theaters throughout the country. (In the Exeter area, the film is scheduled to open at the Music Hall in Portsmouth, NH, on April 30, and at the Screening Room in Newburyport, MA, on May 21.)

Five years ago, when Nathaniel Kahn decided to tell his father's story, he knew he didn't want to just make a survey of his father's better-known works. "Each building had to stand for something," Nathaniel says, "for a deepening of my understanding of him."

As *My Architect* journeys from the Salk Institute to the Kimbell Museum, from the Academy library to the Capital Complex in Bangladesh, Nathaniel and his editor, Sabine Krayenbuhl, intercut shots of these glorious buildings with interviews



with Kahn's colleagues, collaborators and family members—and with arresting footage of the architect himself. "Each person who knew him," Nathaniel says, "knew a slightly different person."

In the same way, he adds, different buildings "showed me different sides of my father." The contrast between the Academy library's exterior and interior, he says, would have had special significance for his father, whose face was badly burned in a childhood accident. "I think that's probably the way he felt about himself—that the inside isn't necessarily revealed by the outside." Nathaniel also sees evidence of his father's "playful side" in the small windows located above the individual study carrels, which literally afford students their own perspective on the campus. "Someone who's a little shy can look out and watch people come in," he says. "There's something a little bit *Romeo and Juliet* about it."

Part of the library's power, Nathaniel believes, stems from what he calls "its duality, its ambiguity. It fits in with the other buildings on campus, and yet it's different. It belongs in a New England town, and yet it speaks out. It looks like an older building, and yet it's a modern one." The library is a building rich in antecedents: not only the Roman ruins that proved so influential throughout Kahn's work, but also an old brick factory building from his boyhood neighborhood in Philadelphia, which shares the library's same distinctive corners and which producer Susan Rose Behr happened upon during her research for *My Architect*. "That was a revelation," Nathaniel says.

While the Academy library figures only briefly in *My Architect*, Nathaniel Kahn hopes to include additional footage on the film's DVD, due for release in early 2005. He also hopes younger viewers, including Exeter students, will take some special lessons from his father's life. "There's so much emphasis right now on early success, on making it by the time you're 25," he says, "and it contributes to the shallowness of our culture. Lou didn't discover his voice until his 50s, but he never gave up on his search." Rather than mapping your life out at 18, he says, better to spend your school years "exploring and discovering what it is you love. Then bet your best self on that."

For more information about *My Architect* (including screenings in your area), go to www.myarchitectfilm.com.

and Pakistan merged in these American works with more specific echoes of old and new buildings on the Indian subcontinent. By integrating these references into sites of a Euro-American elite culture, to which Kahn (as an immigrant Jew of working-class origin) was still something of an outsider, he aspired to a universality that was truly global.

The success of the Exeter library is a tribute not only to Kahn, however, but also to the dedication of Rodney Armstrong, the Academy librarian who had been appointed to work with the architect. Like his counterparts at the Kimbell Museum and the British Art Center, Armstrong was deeply committed to Kahn and was able to offer him a degree of direction and guidance that approached collaboration.

Like all architects then and now, Kahn worked closely with his office staff and with outside consultants. More than most, however, he also required explicit participation from patient clients who could clearly identify their needs and were confident and skilled enough even to propose specific architectural solutions. He once declared to Henry Berg, the assistant director of the yet-to-be-built British Art Center, "I don't want a client who knows exactly what it is he wants. That man doesn't need an architect. I want a client who knows what he aspires to."

A Wondrous Whole

In July 1965, a building committee from Phillips Exeter visited Kahn's office in their search for an architect for the largely neo-Georgian campus's first overtly modern building, a new library.

From the beginning the school was determined to build a significant structure. They also considered four widely respected New York architects—Edward Larrabee Barnes, Philip Johnson, I.M. Pei and Paul Rudolph—for the job. Four months later, Kahn was awarded the commission. The committee was, according to Kahn scholar Peter Kohane, "impressed by the human warmth of his somewhat cluttered office and the energetic young staff working close at hand," and "attracted by Kahn's sympathetic response to their aspirations for the new library as a cultural institution." Although it covers a site of the same size, the neighboring dining hall, also by Kahn, is completely overshadowed by its far more imposing neighbor.

The library, which opened in 1971, is one of Kahn's finest buildings. Here, with a clarity unparalleled in his earlier work, he

replaced the modernist planning precepts that emphasized spaces suited to individual functions (not to mention his own earlier emphasis on repetitive structure) with a structural and spatial logic that accommodated a variety of uses without being determined by them. Simultaneously, he established a processional path through the building that granted real majesty in turn to public gathering and private learning. At Exeter Kahn finally brought together the lessons he had learned in his design for the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, assembling them into a disciplined, functional and wondrous whole.

The library's exterior—four curiously blank screen walls—gives little hint of the drama contained within. An exterior courtyard from which one originally approached the library fell victim to budget cuts. Little besides its height causes the library to stand out from its neighbors, the red brick dorms and white clapboard houses that edge the open green separating this side of campus from Front Street.

Visitors unfamiliar with the library tend to wander around its edges before locating the two entrances, to be found on either side of a glass-walled projection into the recessed arcade that otherwise fills the first bay of the ground-floor story. Kahn defended the result: "From all sides there is an entrance. If you are scurrying in a rain to get to a building, you can come in at any point and find your entrance."

He repeated the bay system of the arcade in the glazed openings of what appear to be the next three stories before giving way just below roof level to another open arcade. While the building is officially only four stories tall, the ground story plus a full complement of mezzanines mean that it actually has eight above-ground levels. The corners, their edges chamfered—that is, cut off on the diagonal—expose the fact that these walls are, in fact, thin brick planes.

The interior of the building initially appears unassuming. Visitors approach a curving dual flight of travertine stairs from either side and are presented with the opportunity either to ascend them or to walk around them to the periodicals reading room visible through the glass rear wall of the small lobby. The travertine, a porous, cream-colored stone from Carrara, Italy, that appears to trap shadow in its recesses, continues the emphasis on natural materials established on the facade.

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Our Architect

(continued from page 29)

Walking upstairs into Rockefeller Hall, one quickly finds oneself in a space whose scale and organization take both the uninitiated and regular library patrons by surprise. The four facades framing this space are nearly identical and equally stunning in their boldness. Supported on diagonal corner piers, each is a concrete plane out of which Kahn cut two voids, an enormous circle floating above a truncated triangle. The play of solid concrete against what is clearly non-structural wooden paneling testifies to the economy of means Kahn employed. Above, in the most sublime gesture of all, floats a concrete cross brace, illuminated by clerestory windows. Its weight, which appears ready to come crashing down upon the onlooker, revives the sense of threat dissipated elsewhere by the reassuring familiarity of the brick skin and wood details.

Staircases tucked modestly into two corners lead to the book stacks clearly visible from Rockefeller Hall. From there it is just a few short steps to the clearly demarcated brick bay structure that forms the outermost ring of the building. Here, against the windows, Kahn set individual wooden carrels.

The 'Doughnut' Design

The design did not come easily to Kahn, who labored over its details for nearly three years, trimming excessively expensive details. At issue was the ambitious scale of his proposal. After the final round of budget cuts, some of which were eventually rescinded, threatened what the architect described as the "rhythm" of the brick construction, Armstrong wrote him that the library committee "cannot

help feeling a sense of real loss." But the elimination of such features as corner towers and exterior arches, as well as the simplification of the roof terrace, if anything enhanced the forcefulness of the design.

Afterwards Kahn described his concept in this way:

"Exeter began with the periphery, where light is. I felt the reading room would be where a person is alone near a window, and I felt that would be a private carrel, a kind of discovered place in the folds of the construction. I made the outer depth of the building like a brick doughnut, independent of the books. I made the inner depth of the building like a concrete doughnut, where the books are stored away from the light. The center area is a result of these contiguous doughnuts; it's just the entrance where books are visible all around you through the big circular openings. So you feel the invitation of the books."

Kahn's account makes the design seem entirely his own invention. Nonetheless, many others were instrumental in shaping its key features. Armstrong, the school's librarian, defended Kahn from the beginning as someone who could realize his own vision of the library as "a laboratory for research and experimentation, a quiet retreat for study, reading and reflection, the intellectual center of the community." Moreover it was Armstrong who requested that the building contain individual student carrels placed near windows. George Macomber, the contractor charged by Kahn with coming up with ways of reining in construction costs, suggested that Kahn substitute concrete for brick at the building's inner core.

The result was a building that helped transform the character of the school that built it

and the sense of what a modernist institutional building could be. Exeter finally gained a public space for the kind of casual encounters Kahn cherished. If students sometimes criticized the central space for depriving them of the silence Armstrong had requested, it also served to dissipate the anonymity of solitary study. Moreover, encountering nearly daily one of the most literally awesome spaces ever erected in the United States has inspired an impressive number of Exeter graduates to become architects.

On March 17, 1974, while on his way home from Ahmedabad to Philadelphia, Kahn suffered a heart attack. He collapsed in the men's room of Pennsylvania Station in New York, and died on the spot. The New York authorities notified their Philadelphia counterparts, but their Sunday evening telephone call to Kahn's office went unanswered. Kahn's staff and family spent a frantic two days retracing his final journey before Kahn's wife, Esther, finally identified his body in a New York morgue.

Kahn's last great American buildings are his most overtly accessible. The facades of the Exeter Library, the Kimbell and the British Art Center screen rather than shield the arcades, vaults and courtyards that lie behind them. Inside Kahn balanced the palpable heft of brick and concrete with the immaterial splendor of light to achieve an enduring poetry. ●

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