

Salk Institute for Biological Studies

*10010 North Torrey Pines Road
La Jolla, California*

1959-65

The Medical Towers had certain functional limitations. Laboratory spaces were too small, exposed ducts in the ceilings accumulated dust, and unshaded light coming through the windows was disruptive to the scientists. In the laboratory buildings for the Salk Institute, Kahn overcame these limitations. The laboratory spaces were made larger and more flexible, the ducts were given a closed space of their own, and great overhangs protected the windows from direct sunlight. There are, however, more important differences between the Medical Towers and the Salk Institute. The Salk Institute was Kahn's first complete vision of a new architecture, one which responds to the whole human being. Kahn said [24]:

When Salk came to my office and asked me to build a laboratory he said, "There is one thing which I would like to be able to accomplish. I would like to invite Picasso to the laboratory." He was implying, of course, that in science, concerned with measurement, there is this will of the least living thing to be itself. The microbe wants to be a microbe, the rose wants to be a rose, and man wants to be man, to express. This desire to express was sensed by Salk: that the scientist needed the presence of the unmeasurable, which is the realm of the artist.

Kahn designed the Salk Institute as a mandala. In Oriental art, the mandala represents natural order and hierarchy through the use of a series of concentric geometric shapes, each containing an image of a deity or an attribute of a deity. In Jungian psychology, the mandala is seen as a means of reunifying the various aspects of the self. Kahn's building radiates inward from the exterior utility spaces containing stairs and toilets (body); through the laboratory spaces—where the biological research takes place—which are hermetically sealed, monitored by computer, and served by great spaces for ducts and equipment (mind); through the walkways, which are places of meeting (society); through the private teak screened offices of the scientists

with their ocean views, which are places of contemplation; to the central court with a simple band of water running through it, which is a place of stillness, a facade to the sky, a roofless cathedral (spirit). Thus, the progression is body, mind, society, spirit: the attributes of the whole human being. A great building must serve each of these well and be a means for integrating them.

In the Salk Institute Kahn recaptured the richness of the forms and materials of the great historical architectures, and arranged those forms and materials between earth and sky so as to communicate to us things about ourselves we would otherwise not know. Modern architecture had become fascinated by the machine-like quality of the glass box. Kahn, in designing a laboratory, also used glass to encase the work spaces, but he then wrapped the glass in concrete, in the rich forms of history. Then, between the two wings of the building, he opened a central courtyard, a place of stillness, of Silence.

Salk Institute Community Center

(THE SALK MEETING HOUSE)

La Jolla, California

1959-65 (project, not built)

The Salk Institute was planned to be a complex of three parts: the laboratories, which were built, and residences and a meeting house, neither of which was built because of financial limitations. The Meeting House, although it exists only in drawings, is one of Kahn's great achievements. It is a series of rooms and an auditorium surrounding a great enclosed interior court that has no designated function. It might be used for formal dinners or meetings, but its character lies in not having a designated use. It is a fertile potential, a place for things which are not yet, which still "desire to be."

The shapes that Kahn used in the Meeting House and the strong geometry that organizes these shapes derive in part from ancient Roman architecture. With these references, Kahn showed how modern architects could learn from the organizing principles of the past, and in so doing, once again open up architecture to history. Kahn used some of these shapes, specifically the square enclosed in a circle and the circle enclosed in a square, to give some of the rooms double walls. In Kahn's design the sun comes through openings in the outer wall and is reflected back and forth between the two walls before entering the room. Thus, he was able to modulate and sculpt the incoming light with the thin walls of modern architecture rather than the massive walls used by the ancient architects.

Several of Kahn's projects were never built. He said [19]:

That which is not built is not really lost. Once its value is established, its demand for presence is undeniable. It is merely waiting for the right circumstances.