

New Exeter Library: Stunning Paeon to Books

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
Special to The New York Times

EXETER, N.H. — They're big on making movies and buildings at Phillips Exeter Academy. Currently it's "A Separate Peace" and the new library.

The movie is getting mixed reviews and the library is getting raves. A serene, distinguished structure of considerable beauty by Louis I. Kahn, the new building exemplifies much that has made Kahn the dean of American architects.

An Appraisal

Dedicated officially this weekend, the library has been shaking down for about a year. Last November, after a \$40,000 estimate for moving the volumes from the old library next door, faculty members and students drew up a battle plan and moved 48,000 volumes in apple crates in two and a half days.

The building was a year and a half in design and two years in construction, and cost \$3.8-million. Its hand-made, wood-fired bricks (the last production of a local company going out of business) and its teak, slate and solid white oak (milled in Maine) are quietly sumptuous and keyed to tradition. Tradition is strong at Exeter.

But the building is anything but traditional. The paradox and fascination of Kahn's work is that it seems to embody the whole history of architecture, as it proclaims how contemporary his work and thought really are.

Strong and Subtle

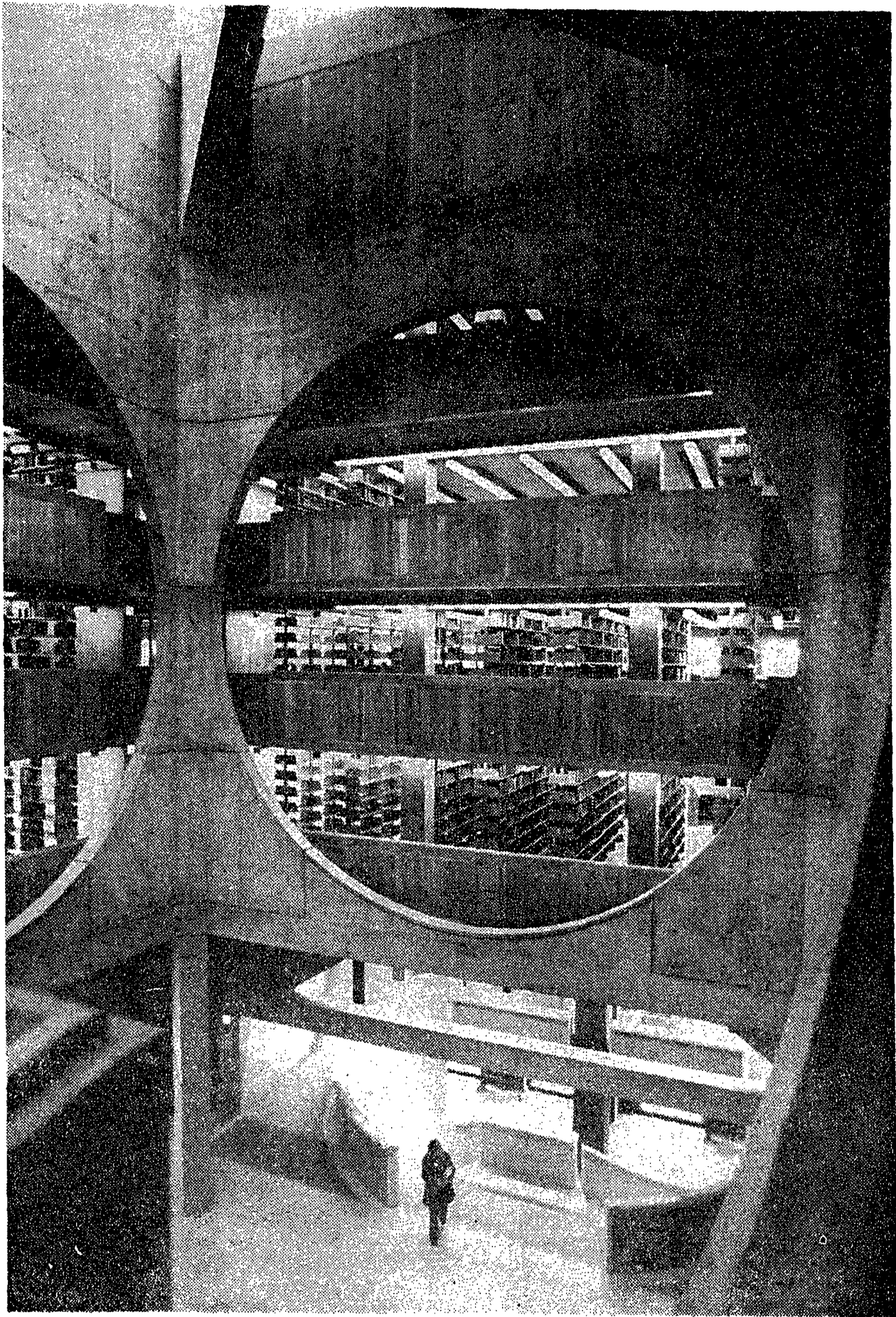
That proclamation is strong and subtle. His buildings evoke the primal simplicity of materials used with an almost religious respect for their basic structural qualities. They also convey a keen awareness of the most sophisticated achievements of historical styles.

But none of his designs ape the mannerisms of the past. The sense of the past is just there, through the architect's remarkable, extremely personal and very passionate love of all that is logical and beautiful in building, at all times.

Kahn's designs frequently carry this love to the point of great achievement by stretching existing concepts and techniques to new frontiers. The result is the impression of a stunning symbolic synthesis of all that has gone before, and all that is still to come. Sometimes that symbiosis is imperfect, but his buildings are full of that special kind of vital inquiry called art.

The process works at Exeter. The library makes its creative statement without jarring the school's ambience, a felicitous blend of New England campus and ivied neo-colonial. "Totally nice," Kahn calls it, "not really vintage, or early, but warm. I have a sympathetic response to brick, and I am taken with American history."

The library is a 108-foot



Interior of Phillips Exeter Academy library. Stacks are seen through openings in central space, lit from above. The New York Times/Joyce Donkeen

square. It has traditional, exterior bearing walls of brick, with piers thickening toward the bottom. There are no "quickie" brick veneers.

Solid brick arches carry this construction 17 feet into the building's interior, forming a kind of square outer

ring. This ring contains the reading areas.

The brick arches (old technology) join concrete structure (new technology) to form an inner ring. In this inner square, the concrete provides wide-span, heavy load-bearing floors for book

stacks, something brick cannot do. The two separate but equal structural systems meet consciously and interact.

Kahn explains the structural interaction in the anthropomorphic terms he favors. For him, buildings feel, think and act.

"The brick was always talking to me, saying you're missing an opportunity," he recalls. "The weight of the brick makes it dance like a fairy above and groan below. Arcades crouch. But where brick is stingy, concrete is tremendously generous. The brick is held by the concrete restraining members. Brick likes this so much, because it becomes modern."

The two nested square doughnuts, Kahn points out, create a left-over, central interior space.

This space, soaring the equivalent of eight stories, is daylighted from above and walled by massive natural concrete with huge circular openings revealing the tiered bookstacks. Unsuspected from the outside, the space breaks on the viewer with breath-taking drama.

Tongue in Cheek

"I just put a roof over it," says Kahn, with the ultimate understatement. But he calls the great room an "event," and, he adds, "A room is the beginning of architecture."

Light is used as skillfully as structure. The outer glass

Continued on Page 40, Column 1

New Exeter Library: A Paean to Books

Continued From Page 33

walls are rimmed by daylight, built-in carrels with views. Bookstacks are away from the windows, at right angles. All have vistas out to the reading areas and into the giant room. Light seems to flow from edge to center, and from the roof above.

After describing these exceptionally sensitive and complex structural-esthetic relationships, Kahn says, tongue

gently in cheek, "It's just a box, isn't it?"

The superior results are due in no small part to the sympathetic working relationship of the architect and client, the Exeter Librarian, Rodney Armstrong, and his building committee, Elliot G. Fish and Albert C. Ganley.

Mr. Armstrong will be leaving Exeter to become the librarian of the Boston Athenaeum on Walter Muir Whitehill's retirement next year, and a suitable parting gift would be completion of the

still-unfinished terraces and planting. His parting gift to Exeter is one of permanent grace, in the pre-McLuhan tradition, although electronic resources are duly included.

"Book," says Mr. Armstrong, obviously not believing it, "has become a dirty four-letter word."

"No one ever really paid the price of a book," Kahn says, "only the price of printing it."

Together, they have made a beautiful box that celebrates books.