IN PHILADELPHIA, AN ARCHITECT
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE PHILADELPHIA.
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PACE SETTER—Richards Medical Research Building, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Designed by Louis I. Kahn and subject of a Museum of Modern Art show.

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IT is quite possible that the center of the architectural world today is not one of the familiar international cultural capitals, but a more modest city—Philadelphia. This new and unexpected source of creative vitality focuses on a single remarkable man and an equally remarkable structure: Louis I. Kahn's Richards Medical Research Building for the University of Pennsylvania.

Although barely completed, Kahn's unusual work has already been accorded the recognition of a one-building show at the Museum of Modern Art, opened this week, to run through July 16; an honor not given lightly. It is a serious pilgrimage point for fellow professionals and starry-eyed students and the subject of long and thoughtful discourses in the architectural press. The English Architectural Review predicts that it will be the most influential structure since Mies van der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology campus of the early Nineteen Forties initiated the American design revolution that led to the esthetic heights of the Seagram Building and the commercial depths of the popular curtain wall. The museum pronounces it "an authoritative act of architecture * * * probably the most consequential building constructed in the United States since the war."

Strength

The object of all this interest is not, by any conventional standards, a beautiful building. It is a strong and meaningful structure, strikingly handsome, reaching beyond mere graciousness or elegance for fundamental architectural values. An exploratory building, its functional needs are studied with probing depth and courageous originality. It avoids all of the clichés, the superficial mannerisms and the easy answers that are spread sleekly and mechanically across the face of American cities and towns. Unconventional design, ("we must not be afraid to show the unfamiliar face of architecture," says Kahn) and advanced concrete technology are integrated with intellectual and esthetic firmness. The result is a building that is architectural and architectonic in the supreme sense—a positive statement of carefully related masses and voids, of materials and structure, of needs and solutions, executed with strength, sensitivity and conviction.

Unlike many of today's better-known buildings, however, the conviction is sure without being aggressive. There are no architectural acrobatics, no flaunting of originality for its own sake. There is an exemplary modesty to this architecture, even as one receives its inescapable impact on first sight across the university campus. (Photographers tend, unnecessarily, to overdramatize it.) Actually a group of four clustered seven-story towers, its most striking feature is a dominant vertical pattern of air-intake and exhaust stacks and stairs, embracing the work floors.

Function

This clearly visible division of facilities and functions is part of Kahn's philosophy of the separation of "served" and "servant" spaces, where technical equipment plays so large a part in modern building. The poured-in-place concrete stacks and service core anchor the group; superbly articulated, precast concrete skeletons form the layered laboratory floors, cantilevered for open-ended glazing; grayed-rose brick facing echoes the color and material of earlier campus buildings. The total effect is of a remarkble synthesis of structure, function and style.

As good as it is, however, the building is not without flaws. There are some bad passages; technical imperfections, facilities that might be better situated, problems of transmission of sound, too-stringent economies that reduce interiors to rock-bottom utilitarian work spaces, which, in turn, have been chaotically partitioned by staff needs. Kahn knows these shortcomings; he punishes himself for his "failures" by pointing them out, although such hazards are incidental to the basic breakthrough made in the concept of the structure as a whole. "To do a right thing badly," he believes, is more important than "to do a bad thing well."

Ideals

The words that a careful study of the building inevitably evokes are old-fashioned terms of morality: honesty, integrity, truth, a dedicated search for the best artistic means to the best functional end. One hesitates to use them, for they are the same words with which Ruskin led the nineteenth century astray, down the primrose path of Venetian Gothic revival, starting an endless chain of confusion of art with morals, nostalgia with esthetics, romanticism with reality. Nevertheless, they are unavoidable here, for Kahn's "return to beginnings," his search for "what the building wants to be," is a moral as well as an esthetic act in an age that makes few moral distinctions in its operations or its architecture, accepting glittering gimmicks and flashy superficialities as the real thing.

In this peculiar moral atmosphere, Kahn himself is as anachronistic as his buildings. At a time when the pseudo-scientist and the supersalesman dominate the creative professions, he is a mystic; a poet-philosopher-artist who calls architecture the "language of the unmeasurable," and structure a "song of spaces." A small, serene man of strong, unconscious magnetism, he speaks of Belief with a capital "B," of the "existence will" of buildings, and of the "adventure of architecture," in an intricate philosophical vocabulary of his own devising.

If this vocabulary is sometimes obscure, Kahn prefers it that way; definitions made too clear, rules made too precise, "leave no room for the imagination to expand." In spite of the fact that his pronouncements often read like a kind of Zen Architecture, their meaning and intent is to make the student and observer search for basic solutions, for valid creative approaches, and for that increasing rarity, satisfaction of the soul. Because today's spiritual vacuum is so great, Kahn's work and philosophy fill an immediate need. They are as necessary to architecture as Mies' earlier stripping of building to basic essentials to rediscover its structural reality.

It is Kahn's sensitive reappraisal of architectural objectives that makes his work important, even when it is imperfect or awkward, and that could be the basis of its most healthful and far-reaching influence. This one impressive building, properly understood, may well point the way to future practice. For as Kahn reminds us, "The future is now."