### Louise I. Kahn

**The Salk Institute Meeting House - La Jolla, CA**

**Type of Project**
- *Gathering place for intellectuals.*

**Date**
- *Unbuilt*
- *Designed: 1959-1965*

**Approx. Sq. Footage**
- *100,000 sqft*

**Structure**
- *post-tensioned columns and 9 ft. deep trusses*

**Parking**
- *168 spaces*

**Comments**
- *Influenced by Roman baths and basilicas*

**Bibliography**

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The first theme for the Salk Institute project in its entirety was to be centered around the theme of health as a unitary, or holistic process. Since it was designed to be a biological research institute, the study of both the body and the mind of the 'total person' was very important. Unfortunately, only the scientific component of Kahn's design was built. The other two facilities, the meeting house and the houses for the fellows, were never built. The laboratory is still looked upon as one of Kahn's greatest works but it would have been exceptional if the whole complex was built as a complex. The meeting house, with its generous spaces and lighting screens, was the part of the institute that Kahn was the most interested in at the beginning of the conceptual process. It was recorded that, long before the Institute had assumed its final form, Kahn's preoccupation with the meeting house was evident, and he spoke of the laboratories almost as an afterthought. This can be seen in the attention to detail that appear in Kahn's experiments with shading light and creating voids within the most inspiring spaces within the initial Salk Institute master plan.
Building Plans

The plan for the Meeting House is based strongly on Hadrian's Villa. Vincent Scully in his 1962 book on Kahn wrote:

*Patterns from Rome and, most particularly, from Ancient Rome as imagined by Piranesi at the very beginning of the modern age, have played a part in the process at the meeting House as well. (An early sketch had been traced by a draftsman, partly as a joke, from a plan of one of the units of Hadrian's Villa itself). “That’s it,” said Kahn.*

There is a multipurpose hall at the center where all of the other buildings stemmed off. The library, dining rooms, lecture hall, gymnasium, and apartments all have their unique form. There was a five hundred seat amphitheater that located on the inland side. Another feature was the "noisy fountain" which was linked to a "quiet fountain" with a slit of water similar to the one that runs through the void of the laboratory space. The interesting part about the meeting house plans is that the buildings facing the water were much more developed than the laboratory facing buildings.
It is evident that the buildings that faced the ocean were the primary concern for Kahn when designing the Meeting House because though many of the section drawings are incomplete or uncoordinated, he took the time to do detailed dimensions of wall sections and sketched many elevations of this side of the building. One could just imagine the incredible views that Kahn's design created for the inhabitants. The plans show how the design had circular forms wrapped around square forms and square forms wrapped around circular forms, but this can all be understood when one looks at the section of these parts and sees that these envelopes are used as screens and act as sunshades which prevented glare off of the windows on the inner side. Because the budget for the institute was cut abruptly, Kahn was forced to put this portion of the master plan aside. As a result, there are very many drawings of the building's sections. But through the many sketches of the exterior elevations, as well as the perspective drawings, the buildings come to life and become a perfect and picturesque addition to the Salk Institute Master plan.
Materiality

When Kahn was thinking about the materiality of the Meeting House, he again made sketches of the portion that faced the Pacific Ocean. It is easy to imagine these forms cast in the same concrete Kahn used for the laboratories, in the beautiful board-formed concrete method. But the Salk drawings show an elaborate detail of concrete with recesses to accommodate thin sheets of stone veneer. The effect is that of a very thin concrete frame holding infill stone. Vincent Scully has written that since Salk:

felt that stone would be much more soothing to the eye than concrete, Kahn sheathed then (and they will remain so at Salk's request if the money holds out) in soft yellow-brown Cordova sandstone from Texas, full of fossil crustaceans and more ambiguous biological life forms.

The money, of course, didn't hold out. There can be little doubt that if the Meeting House was built, it would have been in concrete anyway because stone is so expensive.
Kahn took great care in the dimensioning of the independent screens that wrap the cubic inhabitable spaces with cylindrical ruins and the cubic ruins that wrap the cylindrical inhabitable spaces, which are all on the Pacific ocean side of the Meeting House. He said that they were modeled after the ruins at the U.S. Consulate at Luanda, with an added Roman twist. This new aspect was that, even though the screens were influenced by Roman design, the shell undoubtedly has a distinct modernist appearance and their perfect geometries of the double form system was not only a device to control glare, but they brought together the classical “order” of the great Roman ruins as well. It is believed that it is not the interior space that is particularly interesting, but the space between the building and the shell. This in-between space creates tension and is quite intriguing. This portion of the Meeting House is emulated so perfectly around Kahn’s idea of, “ruins wrapped around buildings” because his design accomplishes the tasks of being both poetic in appearance, as well as being functional as a screen from the glare problem.
Diagrams

1. Massing of the cylindrical meeting rooms in relation to the Dining Hall.

2. “Ruins” screen that surrounds the cylindrical conference rooms.

3. Emphasis on the centrally located meeting hall as the circulation to surrounding rooms.

4. Emphasis of the geometry of the Pacific Ocean facing conference rooms.

5. Massing of the Meeting House. Imagined by Kahn to be the terminus of the Institute master plan.

6. Division of spaces within the Meeting House.
Sketches

Because this building was not built, there is record of many sketches that Kahn did as he explored the possibilities of the scheme for the Meeting House. Not all of them were hard lined or drawn for construction. One can see the exploration of the different schemes and how the building evolved. The Meeting House was a culmination of all of the influential buildings that Kahn saw on his trip to Italy. He incorporated aspects of village monasteries, ancient ruins and other prototypes of retreats. Kahn was working without a detailed program so many of the spaces are unresolved or have a very open quality to them. Since the Meeting House was located at the far end of the site near a steep bluff descending to the Pacific ocean, Kahn could create something quite different from the laboratories further up the hill. Some of the sketches are undated and some are even illegible, but it is evident even from the earliest sketches that the amazing views of the ocean were a driving force for this endeavor and Kahn spent much of his time trying to create an environment where the scientists could meet away from their laboratories and re-