YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

Summary of Design Concepts:

Program brought under one system: structural and roof

Organized around two interior courtyards

Essential natural light for viewing art brought in through skylights on the 4th floor

Program: museum and study center at a large urban university, containing galleries, study galleries, libraries, a lecture hall, offices, and commercial shops.

Site: corner lot, 120’x200’ app.

Client: Yale University, Paul Mellon

Cost: App. $9.6 million, $82.20 per sq ft

Bibliography


Kahn began with a site across from one of his earliest public buildings, The Yale Art Gallery. This context lead him to a building on the street that contrasts to the other facades with transparent glazing and metal infill in the concrete frame. New Haven at the time was in need of tax dollars and did not want more noncommercial uses in their commercial district. This lead Kahn to use the first floor on the two streets as retail space. Where these meet at the corner Kahn removed the infill to show the structure coming down from above, and create a covered entry. This entry brought the visitor into the entry court, an enclosed four story atrium. Through the entry court on the first floor, the auditorium terraces down to the basement. Above the auditorium is the library court, a three story enclosed atrium. The plans are then laid out around the two courts. Mainly galleries on the top three floors, with part of the second and third floor used as a research library. The library opens in itself with two small double height spaces as it is separated from the rest of the museum.
The exterior elevations are made up of the revealed poured in place concrete grid system, transparent glass windows, and pewter-finish stainless steel. The windows are placed according to the interior plan, therefore leaving the exterior elevation with a random feel, but with a functional organization.

The building in section is based on the same concrete grid, opening at the two courtyards to bring light through the building and begin to describe the materials and systems by which it was built. The galleries are then connected through the courts and the visitor can see the connection as they traverse.

The regular twenty by twenty grid of columns is only broken in two parts: the library opens within itself with two small double heights spaces for ease of connection without having to go into the rest of the building, and the auditorium cuts from the first floor into the basement and out towards the hardscaped park to the north of the building.
Kahn's wish was to make a series of room-like spaces for the paintings to hang in. He felt this was appropriate after seeing the collection to be donated at Paul Mellon's home and the environment they were displayed in there. Mellon liked the idea of the smaller rooms, but also pointed out that some large pieces needed larger walls and grander settings. This lead to the two courts with their solid white oak paneling for display of the large pieces and to be the backdrop for the sculptures at the base. The grid of the twenty by twenty structure is also taken advantage of with the planning of the rooms. The infill partition walls allow paintings to be hung, and where they are left out, the columns are a kind of room making discipline. The columns tell one where "the wall was left out and the column took its place" in Kahn's own words.
“The idea was to get as much light from the central space as possible, so that the two sides of the peripheral spaces would have a light source on both sides.”

Kahn spoke of the roof as the means to bring light all the way down through the building and give the visual sight of the sky from below. The roof is made up of terracotta roofing (mansards) and acrylic dome skylights. These have baffles, filters, and diffusers, which modify the light without masking its changes. Between the skylights the grid is made from concrete V beams which form the coffers to support the skylights. The actual mechanics were completed by Pellachia & Meyers, Architects after Kahn’s death, but they were designed in the spirit of what Kahn called for and spoke of. The skylights in the two courts have transparent glass domes, while the ones directly above the art have translucent domes for some protection. Track spotlights are used on the other floors that are only side light by the courts.
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ARCHITECT: LOUIS I. KAHN
NEW HAVEN, CT
COMPLETED 1977

Building to Opening
Functions marked

Entry at corner of Hill & Chapel Streets

Structural Diagram

Sequence of Spaces

Served v. Service Spaces

Served
Service