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Restoring Kahn's Gallery, and Reclaiming a Corner of Architectural History, at Yale

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF
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NEW HAVEN — The restoration of the [Yale University Art Gallery](#) reawakens one of America's great architectural beauties from a slumber that has lasted too long. Like the return of a long-lost friend, however, it may resurrect a few old wounds.

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Polshek Partnership Architects

The Yale University Art Gallery, designed by Louis I. Kahn.

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Overseen by Polshek Partnership Architects, best known for producing sleek contemporary designs, the restoration puts Louis I. Kahn back on the pedestal he so richly deserves. All the elements of his genius are here: the bold geometric forms, the crisp lines, the sensitive use of light, the tactile love of materials. The first of his great masterpieces, the building foreshadows the atavistic landmarks of his late career.

Yet the project should also be understood as part of a larger effort to reclaim a corner of the [Yale](#) campus that includes Paul Rudolph's 1963 Art and Architecture building, now being renovated by Charles Gwathmey, and the construction of an addition for art history students across the street. As a whole, these works address one of the most volatile periods in American architecture and

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Yale University Art Gallery Louis I. Kahn's 1953 building, one of his first masterpieces, has been restored.

remind us of how history is constantly being challenged and revised.

Unlike Lever House, the structural masterpiece in glass and steel that Gordon Bunshaft was designing in New York at around the same time, the 1953 Art Gallery stresses materials and surfaces, projecting an air of mystery.

Years of callous alterations have now been reversed, restoring those elements in all their glory. The west facade has been rebuilt so that its glass and steel frame regains its original lightness; a sunken exterior court that was senselessly roofed over to make room for more gallery space has been restored, allowing light to spill down once more into the lower galleries.

The elegance of that west wall, gently set back from the street, contrasts with the forceful concrete-block facade of the main entrance, an opaque, expressionless screen. Inside the building this quality of restraint gives way to an intoxicating blend of muscularity and delicacy. The deep triangulated beams of the ceilings, with their deep shadows, lend the rooms a mystical air; the stark silolike concrete cylinder housing the staircase reaffirms the galleries' status as sacred space.

Even the minor alterations are dead on. The lobby was renovated by Joel Sanders, a rising New York talent who shows Kahn the proper respect without kowtowing to the master. Mr. Sanders's subdued contemporary furniture and discreet ebony cabinets reinforce the building's intimate atmosphere, transforming the lobby into a welcoming living room.

From here you gaze out at one of the original building's strangest features: the incorporation of an old rough-hewn stone retaining wall that Kahn used to frame his outdoor courtyard to lock the building into its historic surroundings. But the true revelation occurs when you step into the galleries.

Every museum director and curator embarking on a new building project should be required to tour these rooms. The potent thrust of the concrete-beam ceiling draws you into them as if you were being lured into a sacred tomb. You gaze up in awe, and then turn to the paintings.

Most of the paintings, which range from early Italian Renaissance to contemporary, are displayed on partitions supported on steel legs that break the rooms down into a series of

small informal spaces. Paintings by Monet, Renoir and Pissarro hang in big gilded frames along the concrete-block wall that runs the length of the main facade.

These are not the crude concrete blocks associated with prisons and old college dormitories. Custom designed, their small dimensions — four by six inches — look comparatively refined. The paintings pop.

As with all of Kahn's great buildings the entire space is animated by his masterly handling of light. Big plate-glass windows are discreetly hidden behind thin white scrims. A narrow vertical slot of glass overlooking the entrance court gives visitors an opportunity to orient themselves vis-à-vis the outdoors and allows a stream of light to wash down a back wall.

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Perhaps this freshness will encourage us to see Kahn in a new light too.

For the generation that worshipped at his feet, Kahn's work represented a turn away from mainstream Modernism toward an architecture more rooted in history. Mysticism over purity. Obliqueness over transparency. Historical nuance over an abstract utopia. In essence an escape from Modernism's suffocating orthodoxies.

Today most educated young architects are able to appreciate Kahn without feeling they have to reject Le Corbusier. This more enlightened view of architectural history is on display across the street, where Yale is working out a plan for the restoration and expansion of Paul Rudolph's soaring concrete Art and Architecture school. Upon its completion in 1963, the building touched off a firestorm, with many architects, Kahn's supporters among them, decrying its tough Brutalist concrete forms as an example of everything that had gone wrong with Modernism.

That aversion was soon translated into physical abuse. Guttled by a fire only six years after its completion, the building endured a series of unforgivable alterations. Skylights and windows were covered over, transforming the interiors into dark, cavelike spaces.

Additional studio floors were crammed in, so that the towering vertical spaces that made up the core studios became cramped and gloomy. As a result it was impossible to perceive Rudolph's achievement with any clarity for decades.

Mr. Gwathmey would seem to be the ideal person to right these wrongs. A Yale student in the early 1960s, when Rudolph was dean of the architecture school, Mr. Gwathmey attended studio classes on the top floor of Kahn's Art Gallery building, where the architecture school had taken temporary quarters while the new school was under construction. (Rudolph also renovated Kahn's galleries in that period, inserting the kind of white boxes that Kahn despised.)

"It was a very intimidating thing for him to work across from Kahn," Mr. Gwathmey has said, evoking Rudolph's Oedipal conflict. "In those days I worked in his office on weekends. He went through an endless number of versions of the design. I guess you could say the struggle was extensive."

The renovation is likely to shed new light on the interplay between Kahn's and Rudolph's visions. Set back between the concrete forms anchoring the Art and Architecture building's corners, its glass facade will regain its original transparency, echoing Kahn's glass facade across the street. The additional floors will be ripped out, opening up the old stark vertical spaces that lent the studios their grandeur. Light wells that were closed up will be replaced, allowing daylight to stream down the back of the library wall. When finished, the building should feel as audacious as it did four decades ago, a delicious counterpart to Kahn's restrained elegance.

But a long road lies ahead in rescuing recent architectural history. Kevin Roche's nearby Veterans Memorial Coliseum, a big brute of a building whose spiral ramps and rooftop parking have made it a cult favorite of architecture students, is being demolished. A few miles away Marcel Breuer's Pirelli Building has been partly dismantled to make way for a parking lot.

If Kahn and Rudolph have symbolically made peace after decades of supposed conflict, we should be capable of acknowledging and embracing architecture's contradictory threads, which benefit us all.