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# Silence and Light: Louis Kahn's Legacy at the YCBA



AYLA BESEMER & VEENA MCCOOLE | 1:57 PM, OCT 14, 2016

STAFF REPORTERS



Robbie Short

Tucked on the second floor of a building in the heart of New Haven is the office of Knight Architecture. The 3,000 square-foot studio is expansive, with high ceilings and a serenity in contrast with the streets below. Images of the restored Yale Center for British Art are displayed on the office's exposed brick walls. The prints depict tranquil scenes of the building's interior; light and shadows play over the wooden panels and concrete beams. At the entrance is a large wooden table. Atop it rests two awards from the American Institute of Architects: New England, celebrating the recent conservation and renovation of the Yale Center for British Art's striking building. Leaning over a desk in the furthest corner is George Knight ARC '95, the principal architect who led the center's conservation project. He is in quiet conversation with fellow architect Daphne Kalomiris, his hands roving over blueprints.

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The renovation of the building, which took 16 months and involved the challenging task of working around the extensive art collection, which largely remained in the building, was the final phase of an eight-year conservation project. The project was created to celebrate and restore the vision of the center's architect, Louis Kahn, while bringing the building into the 21st century and expanding its global presence. The most recent and final phase involved an interior overhaul, stripping the building down to its most fundamental elements — sometimes only a 16th of an inch separated the galleries from the harsh elements outside — and meticulously updating the infrastructure while preserving the design.

It's ironic, then, that the first thing David Lewis, a postdoctoral research associate at the Center, asks on our tour is if we notice any difference.

Kahn, the building's original architect, died before its completion, but remains an enduring presence in both the psyche of those who work there and in the galleries themselves. In 1966, after Paul Mellon '29 donated his vast collection of British art to Yale and endowed the creation of the Center to house his collection, a search began for the architect to design the building. The search was led by Mellon and the Center's founding director, Jules Prown. Mellon, whose family also founded the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., leaned towards I.M. Pei, who had designed the gallery's east building. But Prown settled on Kahn, who had designed the adjacent Yale University Art Gallery.

Kahn received the commission in 1969. The design of the Center fell at an interesting moment in Yale's architectural history, as new, modern structures emerged between the neo-Gothic colleges and classrooms of the campus. Whitney Griswold, president of the University in the 1950s and early 1960s, created a policy of "modern humanism" due to his fear that American culture — especially its art and architecture — had become homogenized. His policy and commitment to the flourishing of American culture brought a wave of modern design to campus.

"Yale would serve as a great patron for the brightest American architects to come and be given free range to be individuals, to exercise their own genius with substantial monetary support and flexible programs to create the very best buildings they could and buildings that would help American art to develop," Lewis said of the policy.

The era included the design and construction of Morse and Ezra Stiles colleges in the early 1960s — also funded by Mellon — and designed by Eero Saarinen, who also designed Ingalls Rink in the late 1950s. Gordon Bunshaft designed the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library in the early 1960s. In 1963, construction finished on the Yale School of Architecture building, which was designed by Paul Rudolph as one of the earliest forms of brutalist architecture. Also during this time,

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the Kline Biology Tower shot up, designed by prominent American architect Philip Johnson.

In a way, Kahn's work at Yale provides bookends for this era, and for Kahn's own legacy: his first major commission was the Yale University Art Gallery in, completed in 1953, and his final commission was the center, which completed construction in 1976, two years after his death. It was the final significant manifestation of Griswold's humanist era.

## DOMESTIC SPACES

On an overcast Saturday in early October, 40 years after the center's completion, a cluster of eight symposium attendees gather across the street from the building, huddling in to hear Jules Prown over the noise of traffic rumbling down Chapel Street. Prown is the "ultimate authority" on the building, according to Lewis.

Prown signals to the opaque skylight panels above the fourth floor gallery, explaining the mechanisms of UV filtration and even light dispersal. Without these protective measures against direct sunlight, he says, it is difficult to get other institutions to agree to lend their items to the center. "The conservators are taking over the world," he says. "It's all getting far too bureaucratic," a snowy-haired woman echoes.

"Honesty and truth are fundamental to this building," he tells the crowd, adding that everything about the structure is explicit. There is honesty in the natural state of all the materials used and honesty in how the building's exterior reflects the design within — the 20-by-20 bays that house the collection inside are made apparent by the columns interspersed across the building's facade, one every 20 feet. The geometric order of the building corresponds to the "golden ratio," a point of mathematical fascination spanning back to Ancient Greece and a point of order for Kahn. This, Prown says, is what makes being in the Center so comfortable.

The building's exterior is an array of glass and steel, though Kahn never would have referred to it as steel. Instead, he may have called it pewter or lead. The paneling had to be "absolutely nonreflective," according to Prown, who recalled that if Kahn received a panel in which he could see his own hand reflected, he would reject it. Kahn saw materials as "condensed light," Prown says, and the steel panels acted as opaque windows. The Center's facade is a nod to digitization, with the alternating panels and windows corresponding to off and on, or more poetically, silence and light.

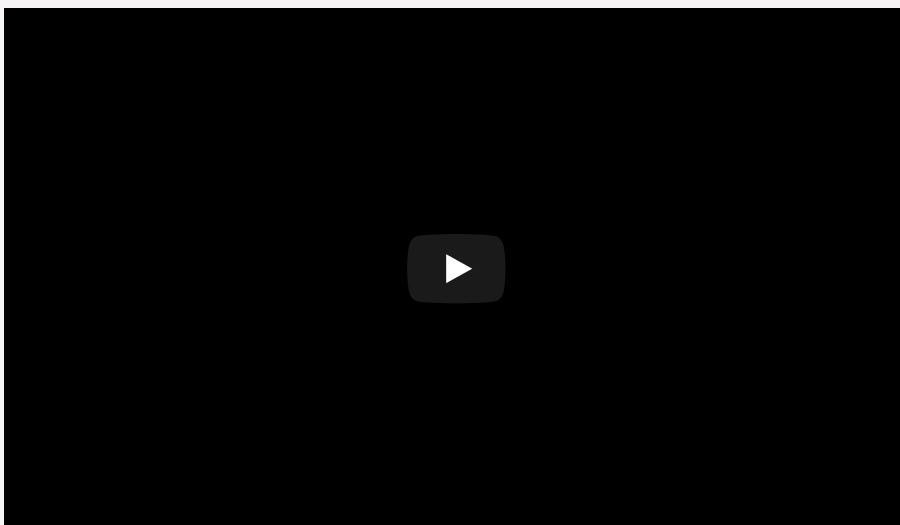
The crowd moves across the street and the noise fades as the glass doors swing shut behind us. The oppressiveness of the low-hanging entrance suddenly vaults up into the four-story, oak-paneled entry court. The urban space of New Haven seems to disappear — instead, the group could be standing in the entrance court of a country manor,

suddenly transported to the British countryside. Elegant sculptures punctuate the open space, including John Cheere's dramatic piece, "Samson Slaying a Philistine." Propped against it on the ground is a painted bronze sculpture — a bag of trash — by Gavin Turk, aptly entitled "Bin Bag #4." Prown shakes his head after disdainfully directing the group's attention to the humorous anachronism. "I hate that thing," he mutters under his breath.

While thematically inaccurate, the trash bag is ironically consistent with the collection's domestic origins. The paintings in Mellon's collection were not the grandiose European paintings of his father, nor the French impressionists of his sister, but instead were largely domestic images: horses in fields, countryside landscapes. They were not, according to Lewis, images that would be hung in Versailles, but rather in an English country manor, which is precisely what the center evokes.

The materials used in the space remain their natural color and each are in some way reminiscent of Britain. Even the steel gray on the outside of the building and throughout the exhibitions brings to mind the "shimmering rain clouds" over London's skyline, Lewis said. The walls are covered with cloth, as they would have been in a country manor — there, silk; here, Belgian linen — and the floor is travertine marble. The carpet, too, is a uniquely colored wool, made from the wool of sheep the center raised on a specific diet.

Moving through the space, the museum goer is always oriented, aware of his or her location in proximity to the two courtyards — the entryway court and the Library Court. That design was deliberate as well, to prevent the "museum fatigue" of meandering through endless exhibits with little sense of direction. The light — much of which comes from above, through skylights fitted with UV-diffusing light filters — is uniform across the space, and prevents one's eyes from being strained. Lewis described it as a "human scale" that does not overwhelm the visitor.



"You have natural light coming in all the time, and can sense the changes in weather," Lewis said. "It is a very tranquil kind of space: The color is subdued; the atmosphere is quiet; the light is slowly moving across the paintings. The idea was to prevent museum fatigue. That was one of [Prown's] major goals when he made the specifications for the building and it was very much in opposition to a lot of the trends in museum building in the 1970s."

The collection — the largest of British art outside the United Kingdom — is hung on a series of temporary walls known as "pogo panels," under which seep pools of natural light. The gaps beneath the pogo panels — new since the renovation, but consistent with Kahn's vision — play into the building's propensity for truth: The spaces are meant to indicate the temporary nature of the arrangement, and provide a sense of continuity across the rooms.

As we drift through the homey fourth floor — perhaps stopping to gaze at a Stubbs painting while sitting on one of the couches arranged throughout the museum — we come upon the upper left corner of the museum, referred to as the "Turner Corner" by Lewis. Situated at eye level, and lit by a large window to its left, is the "Dort or Dordrecht: The Dort packet-boat from Rotterdam becalmed:" the only painting in the center that never shifts location, according to Lewis. The painting once hung in Farnley Hall, a manor in North Yorkshire, and was painted specifically for a spot above its fireplace, meant to be lit from the left by natural light. The Turner Corner in the Center honors the painting's origins, though perhaps in an abstract way — indeed, the light in New Haven is richer than the light in Yorkshire, Lewis said, and while the painting originally hung up high, it now sits face-to-face with the viewer.

On the fourth floor, at the back of the museum, is the newly re-imagined Long Gallery, which is widely recognized as a major point of pride for the renovation. Spanning nearly the length of the center, the densely adorned gallery is reminiscent of the long galleries of British homes, which originated during the Elizabethan era and were intended to display painting collections, act as indoor exercise spaces and as an elegant backdrop for social gatherings.

At the Center, the Long Gallery doubles as a study space where each segment of the wall is hung with paintings of different themes, ranging from beaches to British theater to "chaos and conviviality." Professors can request a specific hang, allowing students to look at how the portrayal of different concepts in art evolved over time. Over 200 paintings from the 16th century to the present are on display, returning to Kahn's original conception of the space.

The Long Gallery, like much of the center, had progressively — if subtly — drifted away from the specifications made by Kahn in his original designs. Something as small as an out-of-place security camera or the

transition from wool to synthetic carpet took the building away from its founding vision in a process called "architectural drift."

## BUILDING CONSERVATION PROJECT

With bleached white oak panels and threadbare linen fittings worn from up to 40 years of use, it was clear to conservators studying the building that it was in need of refreshing. The 200-seat lecture hall — an integral facility for collaborative efforts with other departments and disciplines — was woefully ill-equipped with dated technology. Fire shutters in the Entrance Court and Library Court had long ceased to work, putting the collection at risk of fire damage. The concrete was coated in decades' worth of stains, and travertine tiles were either damaged or at risk after being laid on an uneven mortar setting bed below.

The notion of conserving a building — as opposed to conserving the works of art it houses — is a relatively new concept, according to Prown. But the YCBA's conservation has become an essential part of the Center's identity; a section of the Center's website is dedicated to articulating the conservation process for public understanding.

"Meyers had a vision about how the building needed to comprehensively work, and the need to address all of these pressures," said Knight, who credited YCBA Director Amy Meyers GRD '85 with prioritizing the refurbishment and improvement of the Center upon her appointment in 2002.

The conservation plan was not about identifying problems, but about understanding the essential aspects of the building, and working to preserve those, Meyers said. A conservation plan looks at the building's elements, and creates a hierarchy that answers the question: "What is most important, and what can never change?"

Knight said he was surprised that he was contracted to undertake the most complex conservation work in the history of the Center, once a place of refuge and serenity for Knight during his time at the School of Architecture. But his appointment was neither coincidence nor afterthought; conversations with Knight immediately reveal his intimate understanding and profound appreciation for Kahn's architectural legacy.

Knight described the pleasure he took in reading Kahn's artistic descriptions of the building; Kahn's consistent use of anatomical terminology clarified the intertwining systems that comprised the Center. "Imagine a trailer truck-scale of transformers," Knight said. "That was the heart that sent the pulses out through the nerves, which were the wires." The two vast chambers in the basement were known to Kahn as they are now known to his successor: the lungs. Self-contained spaces with humidification panels, giant fans and filtration mechanisms that inhale and exhale air through the building, circulating conditioned

air and purifying exhaust air. Air travels through two shafts clad in gunmetal, which Kahn described as the bronchi.

"Kahn conceptualized the mechanical systems such that [they] became an integral part of the architectural organization," Knight said. "It lends to this incredibly dignified and serene sense of order that typifies this building and all of his buildings."

According to Knight, the restoration of electrical and mechanical systems within the highly "entombed" building was a central challenge. Today, the ceiling of the fourth floor is an exposed network of passages connecting smoke detection and sprinkler systems. In the heat of last summer, Knight and his team cut twenty holes in the roof of the building to implement these new systems, and placed ice-fishing huts on the roof to cover the construction holes.

The entire conservation process was further complicated by a condition set forth by the Mellon bequest. The condition required that all artwork remain in the Center — even during construction — and Knight intended to honor the Mellon request as well as protect the valuable art from risking damage in transit to storage. This important detail transformed the way the interior of the Center was refurbished. Rooms within the gallery were partitioned off to store artwork in temporary, dust-resistant conditions while adjacent rooms were stripped bare. Knight described the process of sequencing mechanical and electrical improvements in a way that maintained temperature, humidity and air purity throughout the project.

"Louis Kahn understood the life of buildings and how they continuously evolved, and was keenly interested in embodying that in his own architecture," Knight said. Knight's intention was to strike a balance between preserving and celebrating aspects of the building that are irreplaceable cultural documents unto themselves, as well as maintaining the center's usefulness. Knight quoted Meyers, who described the Center as the largest and most complex work of art in the building.

## A MAGNIFICENT RUIN

After walking through the gallery's spaces, David Lewis leans against one of the porticos and looks from the fourth floor down to the Library Court below. Late-afternoon sunlight issues in through the windows and reflects on the walls in narrow slants.

As he watches the sunlight trickle across the court, he recounts a story of Kahn's trip to the Baths of Diocletian in Rome. The baths, which stand in ruin, have been converted to an art gallery. Lewis said that Kahn was captivated by the light moving over exposed bricks, the protective plaster facades having been ripped away. According to Lewis' retelling, Kahn said "this is what bricks are for." The essential

beauty of the Baths, even in ruin, was Kahn's vision of architecture.

Kahn — stubborn and particular, but deeply philosophical in his designs — believed in architecture as a “great gesture towards monumentality and the eternal,” Lewis says. In a video detailing the process of conserving the Center, its most recent architect suggests a hypothetical scenario in which a tsunami washes away the building's temporary elements. A magnificent ruin — the kind that awed Kahn in Rome — is what would remain.

Kahn's own legacy is captured in two of Yale's most famed buildings right across the street from each other; works of art housed in two works of art.

Behind the tranquil facade of Knight Architecture is Knight's shop, filled with myriad construction materials and naturally illuminated through a shuttered skylight. In the corner, a large, black and white portrait of Louis Kahn is propped on an easel. Knight acknowledges the portrait as if Kahn were an old friend or ever-present mentor, overseeing the honesty and integrity of all that comes to life in his workshop. Separated by nearly forty years, the two men are deeply connected through the building that will outlast them both.

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