This essay appeared under the title “Between beakers and beatitudes (The Salk Institute's dual role of function and landmark)” in *Progressive Architecture*, October 1, 1993. It was a title I did not like at all. This is the title I submitted.

# On Adding to the Salk

by

Michael Benedikt

Whether it is Gwathmey/Siegel at the Guggenheim, or Mitchell Giurgola at the Kimbell, or David Rinehart of Anshen + Allen at the Salk, the problem of adding to a modern masterpiece at once invokes two worlds, two perspectives.

The first belongs to us all: it is the perspective of culture, art, and Architecture; it is about a masterwork’s unique place in those histories, and about the way it also transcends them. The second perspective belongs to the masterwork's client/owners, to the people, that is, who manage the institution it houses, who come to know the building’s inadequacies and dream of solutions to those inadequacies, who feel the need to expand and, in so feeling, begin to resent the very walls that so idiosyncratically contain them. These two worlds, these two perspectives, are almost bound to come into conflict, with the former cast as conservative.

This problem is especially acute when adding to Louis Kahn’s buildings. For Kahn explicitly made “offerings to Architecture,” and designed working buildings for real and specific clients. In so doing, Kahn almost preordained the split, the divergence. Of course, Kahn did not want it this way. In thirty years of socially engaged practice—this before the Yale Art Gallery—he had become architecture’s exemplary “metaphysician of the practical,” committed as no one else seemed to be to the all-but-impossible mission of showing how architecture chould and should unite the transcendent with the workaday worlds. Thus motivated, and through a hundred revisions, Kahn’s better projects arced to that gravity-less point where, caught in curious irresolution and built, they came as close to perfect as any architect can hope to come in “solving” the problem.

As though to make matters worse for would-be amenders and adders to Kahn, his later works, especially the Kimbell Art Museum and the Salk Institute, seem to have been designed with an open-endedness and modularity in mind that postiively invites extension. They were also remnants of larger schemes, and might therefore, although built, be viewed as works in progress. More temptation. However, the open-endedness, the repetitions, symmetries, absences, and abrupt truncations of the Kimbell and the Salk turn out to be essential to their effect. The invitation held out to complete or to continue the work is only an apparent one, perhaps most wisely to be turned down.

We might say, then, that there are “two” Salk Institutes in La Jolla, and that we are adding to both. The "first" is a monument to the science of Life, standing proudly on the last hills of the last frontier and baring itself to the Pacific. The "second" is a place for the

life of Science, a place of work carried out in a building designed in consummate consideration of its nature.

The "first" Salk Institute—with its magnificently open plaza "joining sky to earth" and "earth to ocean," with its shouldered stair-and-study towers of immaculate concrete and teak gazing out upon the setting sun with the inscrutable dignity of the statues on Easter Island, with its spring of life-water, begun miraculously at the foot of the orange groves of Eden cutting into the high desert plaza—has become talismanic to two generations of architects, the source, the touchstone of what is possible for us. This, as Kahn would say, is the domain of *Form*.

In the "second" Salk Institute, scientists in the cafeteria talk animatedly about genomes, heterozygotes, and the results of irradiation during meiosis. Upstairs, their laboratories sparkle with uncountable numbers of flasks and pipes, digital counters, optical analyzers and curiously swaying little mixing tables, all bathed in the light of parabolic reflectors. Six floors of interstitial service space, ten feet high and once considered extravagant, have come into their own. At the east end and under the Chinese Orange grove, a tall machine room, worthy of a ship and as lovingly tended, thrums its concrete floor. This is the domain of *Design*. (Though let it be said, on behalf of Form: two magnificent light-shafts cast a light down here no less sorcerous than the sunshine which slices though the inner stair-and-study towers to illuminate the lower court levels, as cool as canyon bottoms .)

The "first" Salk Institute is surrounded by photographs and talk of Architecture. Its context is the history we all know: the spell woven by Kahn's words and the way they addressed the ache we all feel to build meaningfully, cosmically, in tribute or in critique of man, his modern soul, and his institutions.

The "second" Salk Institute is short of space, and choked by parking and an encroaching UC San Diego. New condos stumble along the south property line, their thin stucco walls and blank-pane windows contending loosely for superior ocean views. Along the north side, traffic is heavy down to Torrey Pines Park and its beaches. A stone's throw to the west sit the Salk's own temporary buildings, which like so many "temporary buildings," albeit here with the self-important air of Los Alamos' historic shacks, are far from temporary and barely conceal a large parking lot for Institute workers. One comes upon this second Salk not in the still and perfumed pages of a book, nor in a darkened lecture theater, nor after a long drive up through eucalyptus forests…but with suddenness, a swerve off a busy North Torrey Pines Road and half a mile from Interstate 5 to LA.

Let us now look at Anshen + Allen's additions to the "two" Salk Institutes, both now under construction.

Of the first Salk we know this: one does not fool with a talisman. Bringing luck and power, and harboring our dreams, no apprentice can presume to improve upon its design: only the wizard who set the spell can do it right, all the sanctioning given to the apprentice by the commissioning king (here, Jonas Salk) notwithstanding. The sacred configuration—the Form—of the first Salk Institute simply cannot be tampered with; it is even to be approached with trepidation.

Such, at any rate, was the impulse informing the furor that greeted David Rinehart of Anshen-Allen's design for the new East Wing and, in particular, his proposed handling of the terminus of the plaza axis with a mildly heroic, circular concrete drum and bridge. For gone thereby would have been the mysterious, absent Center; and answered, mildly, would have been the question: where, and whence, this axial energy? Only a trace of the drum remains in the current design, in curiously reversed form.

Rinehart's new building also came too near to the sacred space. We wanted to know: why need it be built anywhere near the existing building? There were and are good reasons. But, on Kenneth Frampton's advice to Dr. Salk, back it was set, twenty feet more, and for the good.

And what of the eucalyptus grove that once (magically) confused the axial entry to the plaza, and that is now decimated by construction? This will be replanted, as it once was transplanted, except for where there is no room for roots (as over the shallowly buried auditorium) and of course, in the space actually occupied by the new building.

Do any offenses to the first Salk Institute remain? Unfortunately, I believe so.

Consider the question of "facing." Though their bulk runs east-west, the two wings of Kahn's Salk do not face each other: they face westward, to the sea, radically polarizing the eastward and wesward experiences of the plaza. This is one of the most powerful gestures the building makes. Rinehart's buildings face each other, nose to hulking nose, creating a central point of convergence from which still radiates the geometry of the auditorium (and, less directly, a suite of arcuate forms in the plan), a central point barely more subtle than the drum and bridge structure once proposed there. Exacerbated by the dual convexity of the skylights, one need not be mystically inclined to predict the "pressure" that will be felt here, nor to regret—all intervening distance and trees notwithstanding—how this indeed tampers with the Form of Kahn's axis. The new building(s) should have "faced" east.

Now consider the question of access. With the moving of the visitors' center to the new buildings, no longer will Kahn's plaza be come upon from any and all directions, but, rather, it will be "properly" entered, and the whole procession normalized. Oh, Louis. There are arguments to be made on the practical level here, certainly, but the making of what amounts to a large gate to the precinct is most un-Kahn-like and quite at odds with the Form of the institution he sought to bring to light. (One is reminded of the "proper" entrance of the Kimbell which is not the parking level and its constraining east door, but the park level to the west and its broad approaches to the open vaults.)

Perhaps, then, Kahn's Salk Institute, conceived as a symbolic order and as a single institution under the guiding desire of a single man, Jonas Salk, simply could not and cannot be added to felicitously. One wonders, indeed, if there would have been any controversy at all had the new building, situated physically exactly where it is now, been separated from the other by a public street and therefore on another "property" as another institution: so great is the power of the knowledge of civil law in the symbolic realm. As it stands, the durable dream--the Form--that is Kahn's Salk Institute as built, is now inviolable. The Story is written. As fine as Rinehart's building may turn out to be in its own right, it is unlikely that it will be much photographed with Kahn's, and still less likely that it will enter architectural heaven alongside it. We architects, reverent to a fault

and especially about Kahn—perhaps, in part, because he was so reverent about Architecture—would simply not have it any other way.

Now let us look at the "second" Salk Institute, that is, at the building as designed, at the whole complex as Designed in its full circumstantiality and specificity. A selection of observations:

Where Kahn's design is generous in providing "useless spaces," as in the studies and the open terraces between them, in the below grade patios, in the interstitial service areas, the new buildings are abstemious, form fitting function like a sock fits a foot.

Where the earlier design is porous to breeze and sunshine, like a dried piece of coral, Rinehart's is tight, its balconies well shaded, its shadow play reduced to a minimum.

Where Kahn's design could be traversed in every place, along every balcony, up and down its twenty staircases and fourteen elevators, its plaza criss-crossable in thirty one combinations, the Rinehart design, providing eighty per cent again of existing laboratory and office space, offers six staircases (two of which serve all levels), four elevators (two non-freight) and a plaza crossable five ways, one underground.

Where the original building, around its fountain and on its plaza offers a variety of configurations and surfaces, high and low, narrow and wide, for sitting on, eating at, and leaning on, the sculpture of the addition's skylights emerge shoulder-high and higher, nowhere affording a place to linger. The transition west to higher ground, again an opportunity for place making, is treated in similarly indifferent if not inhospitable fashion.

Where the Kahn design brought natural light down to what would otherwise have been basement—indeed, going far beyond that to create generous and cool patios alongside the lowest levels—Rinehart buries its lowest level, marked 'Laboratories,' solidly in the ground. Perhaps these levels are not for people. Were they destined to house anything alive, living, Kahn would not have let this happen.

Where the earlier design "gave away" almost half of its volume to servicing the laboratories, this to such good, long-term effect, the new one provides one such level to serve all, and the location of the possible requisite "drops" through two levels is unclear.

Kahn would rarely leave columns in a deep space, simply "helping out" with the span above: if he could not span a single space a single way, the necessary intermediate columns would have three-dimensional consequences everywhere. Rinehart does the sensible and more economical thing. The new laboratories sport a double row of columns down the center of the space. Ceiling and floor are oblivious to their presence.

In sum: where Kahn thought of a building as a geographical setting, as land form, as Nature-reconstrued not as a plant or body or organism but as an ecological condition intrinsically generous in the way it provided for life, exceeding in number of possibilities the number of ways it was actually inhabited and resisting, thereby, complete subjugation to “program,” the Rinehart design derives from another metaphor—perhaps machine, perhaps container—and cleaves to its program, to the *what-is-needed*, only.

But what have I shown, here? Louis Kahn did not design the new building. Not only the architect, but the program, the budget, and even the client have changed at the Salk. It

may be that both the life of Science and the science of Life have changed too, becoming more business-like, more computerized; and perhaps this explains the new design's honest adoption of familiar commercial/industrial forms, Kahn-like concrete notwithstanding. For all of these reasons we ought to look at the new building again--that is, in its own right, when completed, and in full cognizance of the fact that it is entirely possible to do fine buildings contra Kahn.

What, then, might we look forward to?

By all accounts of the process so far and by the evidence on the ground already, the new East Wing will be up to Anshen + Allen's reputation as a firm for unusually high standards, crisp detailing, and forthright, functional design. The money seems to be there for excellent materials and craftsmanship, and so does the motivation. Indeed, from the young construction worker to Salk himself, everyone on the job is acutely aware of the power of the original buildings and of what is at stake. And just as virtually all those working at the Institute—from technicians to scientists, from secretaries to maintenance men—count themselves lucky to be amongst its sunny walls, so, one hopes, will none of them feel second-bested by working in the new wing. For Kahn's legacy consists not only in his ideas about Form, Design, Order, Desire and the rest, and not only in what is imitable of his built work. His legacy is a particular spirit, perhaps best described a seriousness about the making of a building together with an optimism about how science, creativity, and good work in all its forms can fashion one, generous, world in which the numinous and the ordinary are identical.

This spirit is what lives on. As it should.