

## Chris Dyson's inspiration: Phillips Exeter Academy Library, New Hampshire

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**Chris Dyson frequently references Louis Kahn's clarity of vision and craftsmanship in his own work**

Phillips Exeter Academy Library, New Hampshire, USA | Louis Kahn | Completed 1965-72



Source: Gunnar Klack

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I've always admired Exeter Library since my university days at the Glasgow School of Art. I studied under Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan who were really into Kahn, Le Corbusier and Aalto and this rubbed off on me in a big way. My thesis was for an east-meets-west

world university in Istanbul and Exeter Library was the inspiration for a library I designed there as a place of stillness, quietness and reflection.



Source: Gunnar Klack

I didn't actually visit Exeter Library until much later when I was working for Jim Stirling and Michael Wilford. Later still, since setting up my practice in Georgian Spitalfields, I've found a deep connection between the architectural language of Louis Kahn in relation to advancing an appropriate architecture for working in historic settings. I'm sure I'm not the first to find this, but I personally feel very comfortable with the use of cut gauge brick arches, Flemish, English and

common bond brickwork with flush pointed lime mortar, all of which I now see is in Kahn's work.

At Exeter Library Kahn was at the top of his game – it’s a really well considered building. Kahn was absorbing ideas of a lifetime of looking at European references and applying these to his large-scale projects. I love the clarity of Kahn’s work. When I was a student I visited a lot of Scottish castles and Kahn cites castle plans with their doughnut rings of served and ancillary spaces as a reference for Exeter Library. Here there are three zones – the external walls with the perimeter reading carrels; the circulation and book stacks; and then this big, temple-like civic community space at the heart of the plan.



Source: Gunnar Klack

The appeal of Exeter Library isn’t only its brick skin. There’s also the strong, simple, bold geometry - which I’ve always liked in architecture and why I was drawn to work with Stirling and Wilford - and also the quality of the oak joinery. Just like Georgian buildings, the inner lining of the library is very finely crafted. I also appreciate the quieter form of this architecture, which maybe has greater resonance over time and offers more adaptability. Georgian town houses are similarly loose fit in that they can accommodate many different things as they change over time.

There’s a lot to learn from an architect like Kahn in terms of robust masonry construction. He understood how a building frames a landscape from the inside out through the use of

window reveals and this is something I also employ in our window specification. We tend to go for dark reveals and window selection so that your eye is drawn out to the landscape. I also appreciate Kahn's sophisticated use of light. This sense of light and how it falls on a material such as fair-faced concrete or brushed stainless steel, gives a sense of emotion to a space. I also admire how you can shutter the space to control the light at your desk where the reading carrels come to meet the elevation.



Source: Leonel Ponce

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I finally visited Exeter Library on one of my annual road trips with my then colleague Manuel Schupp to places that we found inspirational. On this occasion, we visited a series of Kahn buildings including Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven and the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California as well as Exeter Library. The reading carrels were much bigger than I'd imagined from the drawings while the space in the middle seemed quite small. But it was beautifully crafted and had weathered really well. I really liked details such as the 'socket' – a German word for the base of the building that deals with the different levels around the site. I've also always admired the fair-faced concrete, although it's extremely difficult to deal with in our climate. The detailing of the bespoke lighting is the sort of

things I dream of doing some day in our own work. It would be interesting to see how the library has responded since to the recent changes in how we use libraries.



Source: Daderot

I often embrace references to Kahn in my work. We're currently designing a small office building opposite my studio. This has a very close connection to the elevation of Exeter Library with heavy brick piers that get lighter the further they go up.

I haven't, however, designed a university building under my own name yet although I would love to design a library. It takes a while as a practice to establish your own voice.

Initially, to survive

we swam in the waters of Georgian refurbishments, and now I feel we're swimming into a bigger sea with projects that are larger and new build with lots of different opportunities. So who knows?

## **The story of Phillips Exeter Academy Library**

Phillips Exeter Academy had been planning a new library for 15 years before settling on Louis Kahn to design a building that was sympathetic with the private high school's Georgian campus. Completed in 1972, it is the largest secondary school library in the world with 210 study carrels, plus several reading lounges and common area. Faced in local Exeter brick, the elevation is arranged in piers that decrease in width as the building rises, with window widths increasing accordingly. The ground floor is an arcade while the top is opened as a pergola. The plan is arranged in three square rings: outer load-bearing brick structure and carrel spaces; middle reinforced concrete ring of book stacks; and inner central atrium. Students progress up a grand stone staircase to reach the first floor entry hall. Here, the clerestory-lit concrete-framed volume rises the full height of the building with views up through giant circular openings to the book stacks and perimeter study areas. The latter spaces are crafted in oak to provide built-in deskings illuminated from above and via a small wide window – one per desk - with a sliding wooden panel to control sunlight.

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### **Postscript**

*Chris Dyson is principal partner of Chris Dyson Architects. He was talking to Pamela Buxton*