

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW | YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

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

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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.

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 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

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Yale University Art Gallery Louis I. Kahn's 1953 building, one of his first masterpieces, has been restored.

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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.

The stunning variety of the light and the tension between the forms and materials — the delicacy of the partitions, say, versus the brute weight of the concrete — keep us alert. Everything here feels warmly alive.

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