

## DESIGN &amp; DECORATING

## PILGRIMAGE

## How I Warmed To Concrete

A graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy returns to its celebrated but imposing library—and gets it

BY SARA BLISS

**T**HE FIRST TIME I saw the library at Phillips Exeter Academy, I didn't understand the fuss. For five hours in the car, my interior-designer mother raved about this triumph by mid-20th-century architect Louis I. Kahn. Arriving at the school's admissions office for my interview, however, I distinctly remember my 14-year-old self glancing at the library and thinking that nothing about the 1971 building said "masterpiece."

The brick nine-story cube—its corners chamfered and its windows and doorways forming a grid—stood bulky and boxy alongside the New Hampshire prep school's neo-Georgian dorms. Later, we passed through one of its unassuming glass and aluminum doors and entered a narrow vestibule dominated by a travertine double staircase. The steps' solid balustrades blocked our view until we reached the top—and then the heavens opened and the architecture angels sang. "Isn't it incredible?" my mother asked. It was impossible not to be awe-struck.

'Kahn's library asks something of you in terms of engagement.'

The atrium soars 67 feet, capped by massive concrete X beams filtering light from windows just above. Its concrete walls boast huge circular cutouts, across which run four open stories housing the book stacks, their in-facing walls clad in teak. "When you arrive at that central void you are delivered into an architecture that has a lot more presence and grandeur than the Georgian buildings outside," explained William Hall, author of "Concrete" (Phaidon), a book on contemporary buildings constructed of the material.

Still, during my first two years at Exeter, I almost never used the library. It was echoey and often cold. The built-in oak carrels and their spindle chairs, positioned near windows, were assigned to day students so they had a home base on campus. Boarders' versions were set away from the windows. I studied in the snugness of my room.

Senior year, I realized my lagging grades required me to sequester myself from the pull of friends across the hall and MTV dance parties in the common room. The utter quiet of the library served.

Kahn dispensed with the classic library layout: a central reading room with rows of desks and sawlow



Spindle chairs add a touch of history.

lamp light. His square atrium remains nearly empty, and the outer rings of each floor offer sun-drenched sanctuaries that I found after some exploring.

Four cozy red armchairs on the main floor, each framed by an over-size rectangular window, and an empty carrel with views of the tree-tops became my go-to spots. All flood with light during the day.

William Whittaker, University of Pennsylvania Curator of the Architectural Archives, is not surprised the library revealed its charms to me slowly. "It's not just a building, it is a work of art, and works of art take time," he said. "Kahn's library asks something of you in terms of engagement and connection."

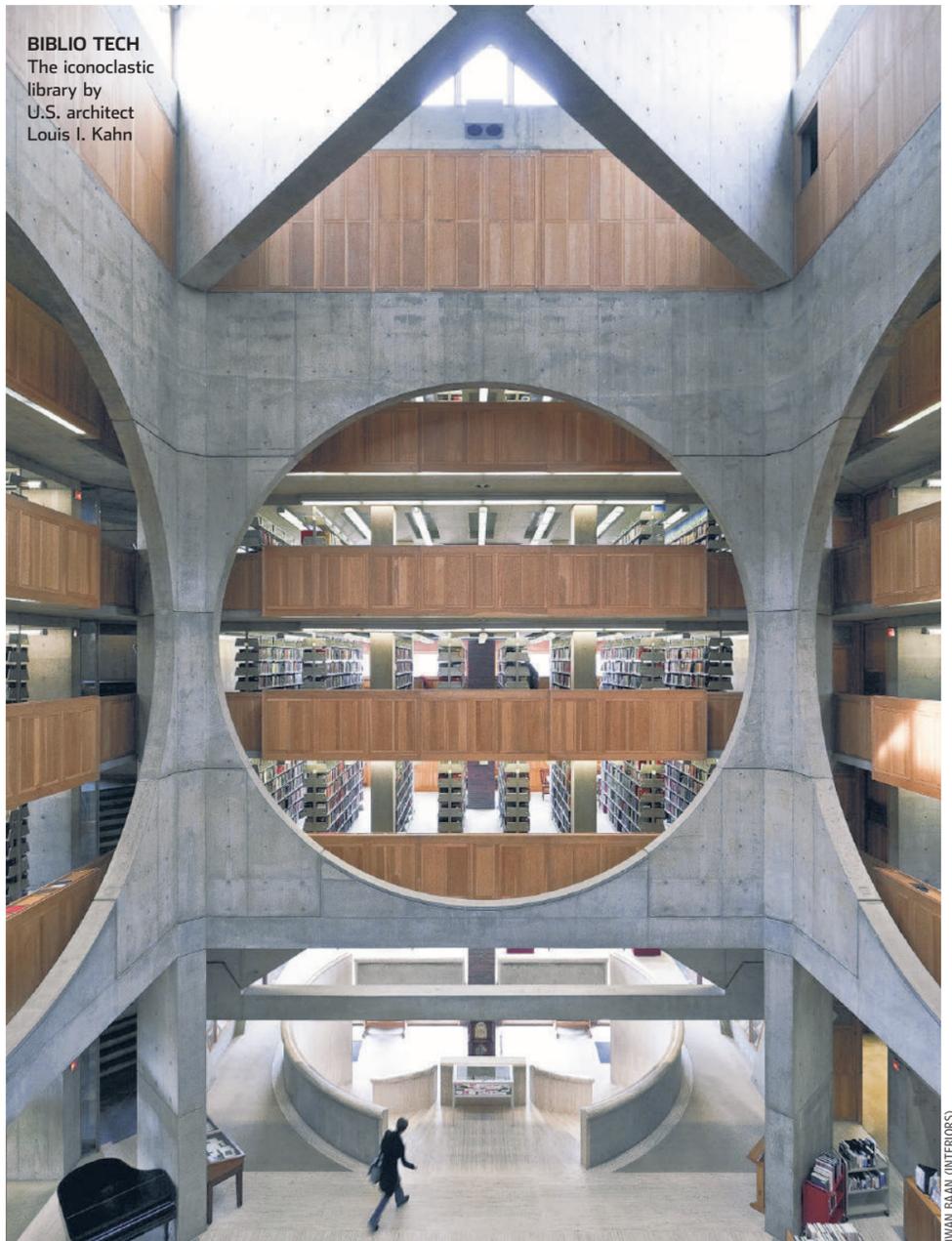
I recently returned to the library, after two decades. The moment at the top of the stairs still took my breath away. This time, however, I kicked myself for not spending every minute I could studying there.

Almost 50 years old, the building remains contemporary; its massive cutouts and materials cutting-edge. "Concrete paired with teak provides instant tension and excitement in the space," said Mr. Hall.

Today, the formerly industrial material still conveys modernity. Retailers like West Elm and CB2 hawk concrete tables, stools, planters. "It has a clean contemporary look that brings a lot of dimension to a space," explained Olivia Rassow of AllModern, a retail site devoted to contemporary furniture.

Architect and designer Craig Bassam, inspired by a 2011 trip to Exeter library, created his own take on the spindle chair for BassamFellows. "Kahn didn't choose chairs that would have identified the building as a 1970s structure," he said. "He chose an archetype that is super minimal and structurally sound. Kind of a radical choice."

Kahn's obsession with natural light stayed with me after my revisit. At home, I usually huddle at my desk in a corner of the apartment. Today, I moved to the dining table, which sun hits all day. Everything seems clearer, crisper, even happier bathed in light.



**BIBLIO TECH**  
The iconoclastic library by U.S. architect Louis I. Kahn

IWAN BAAH (INTERIORS)

## KAHN ARTISTRY // THE STYLE OF THE MODERNIST'S MASTERPIECE BROUGHT HOME



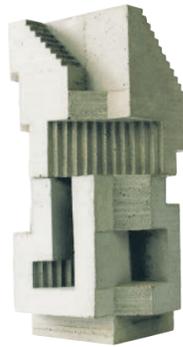
Concrete Tape Dispenser Small, \$25, areaware.com



Piet Boon CON-03 Concrete Wallpaper, \$299 per roll, nxl.com



Mid-Century Wall Desk, \$1,600, westelm.com



Cubic Geometry SIX-11, \$400, davidumemoto.com



Matter Lamp, \$319, schoolhouse.com



BassamFellows Spindle Chair, from \$1,630, dwr.com



Lipscomb Coffee Table, \$725, allmodern.com

## FRESH PICK



Clockwise from top: Royal Delft Blue Fabric in Eternity, Inspiration and Icons Patterns, \$284 per yard, starkcarpet.com

## A TWIST OF PLATE

The famed Delft pottery pattern is reimagined as dishy fabrics and wall-coverings

**WE ALL KNOW** the iconic Delft pattern: the blue-and-white windmills, peacocks, florals that hail from Holland and are as deeply Dutch as Vermeer. But until recently, it lived chiefly on pottery. For the first time in the 400-year history of Royal Delft, the last remaining factory of 33 in the earthenware's namesake city, the pattern is migrating deftly to furniture and walls. This fall, Scalamantré introduces the Nicolette Mayer-Royal Delft Collection of 17 wallpaper designs and 10 textiles.

Ms. Mayer, a Palm Springs, Fla.-based textile designer, collaborated with the legendary delftware factory, combining motifs from pottery introduced in the late-1700s with more modern touches. She also brought a welcome breath of modernity to the wallpaper by using grass cloth and nonwoven papers that might have disoriented Vermeer. Interior designer Mark Sikes suggests using the same pattern of wallpaper and fabric to envelop, drape, even upholster a single room: "It creates a single point of view and it's also so easy." The delicate floral prints lend themselves to a bedroom while the tableware-heavy motifs better suit a kitchen or dining room, creating the illusion that different plates—and rather precious ones at that—hang on the wall. —Eleanore Park



Royal Delft Collections Blue Wallpaper, \$184 per yard, starkcarpet.com

F. MARTIN RAMINI/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL