A Day in the Life of an Icon

The building: The library at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. Designed by Louis Kahn and completed in 1971, the building is an icon of 20th-century architecture. Hundreds of architects visit each year, admiring its soaring, light-filled geometry of circles and squares. The central space — a hollow cube with four enormous circular cutouts revealing several floors of book stacks — is at once audacious, inevitable, and deeply peaceful. But Kahn’s building is also a busy working library, housing 169,000 volumes — the largest secondary-school library in the world. It serves Exeter’s faculty, staff, and visiting scholars, but its primary users are kids: a thousand students ages 14–18.

7:30 A girl with a heavy backpack is already waiting outside, shifting from foot to foot, when the custodian unlocks the doors.

7:49 A few students hunch over computer terminals, printing out papers. Someone runs upstairs to pick up books from a study carrel. A girl sits curled in an armchair, reviewing index cards.

8:04 Edouard Desrochers, the school’s archivist and acting library director, looks over the day’s schedule. It’s going to be busy: 11 sections of Junior Studies, an interdisciplinary seminar required of all ninth-graders, are scheduled for library tours. The tours introduce kids to the library — the books, the periodicals, the technological resources, and perhaps most important, the concept that libraries offer a richness and depth that Google can’t.

In 1964, Exeter’s recently appointed headmaster reviewed plans for a new neo-Georgian library building. He felt the design wasn’t good enough and initiated a search for a different architect. The committee interviewed several, including I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson, and ultimately chose Kahn.

9:09 Up on the fourth floor, a librarian shows a Junior Studies class items from the library’s Special Collections, including a 1932 edition of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam that measures 5 mm by 7 mm and was at one time the world’s smallest book; a 15th-century French illuminated manuscript on vellum; and Geography Made Easy, used as a teaching text at Exeter around 1800. The kids somehow manage to simultaneously twitch, giggle, and ask smart questions.

9:45 “Help!” The library director’s assistant rushes through the periodicals room, in search of the custodian. “I’ve got water dripping down from the ceiling into my office!” But the custodian isn’t around at the moment — he had to go home briefly to let some workmen into his house.

9:47 The staff members place towels and an empty wastebasket under the leak, while Ed hurries upstairs to the bathroom on the first-floor mezzanine. The tile floor in the vestibule is flooded. Water sprays from the utility sink. The shut-off valve won’t budge.

9:49 Ed phones campus security. “Hi. This is an emergency.”

The assistant, back at her desk, murmurs without lifting her eyes from her work, “I’m just glad it’s a sink and not a toilet.”

9:58 A plumber has arrived and fixed the sink. On his way out, he passes through the little paperbacks room at the head of the stairs. “Hey, when did you move these books in here?” he asks, stopping to pull one out and flip through it.

10:35 Another Junior Studies tour. Fifteen ninth-graders turn their eyes upward as the librarian mentions that the big X structure of the roof contains 175 tons of concrete. “Don’t worry, it’s securely anchored up there.” He tells them the building is a masterpiece, “In fact, it was on a postage stamp.”

Nearby, the custodian dusts surfaces. A librarian sifts through the browsing racks near the circulation desk.

10:50 Up in Special Collections, a Junior Studies teacher has a question. “Is it true that an alumnus walked in and said, ‘I have a gift for the library,’ and it turned out to be a second folio Shakespeare, wrapped in a tea towel?”
“It’s true,” the librarian answers, “though I hadn’t heard about the tea towel.”

11:05 On the ground floor, contractors are installing security equipment that will operate in the event of a campus lockdown. Yesterday, they installed wiring on one of the main doors; today, they prepare to drill around the second entrance.

11:18 Ed comes downstairs to meet his next Junior Studies tour and sees the new electrical housing above the doorway: bright white and clumsy-looking against Kahn’s dark brick. He points to a recessed concrete channel. “Could the housing have been put in the reveal?”

The contractor shakes his head. “Too big. Wouldn’t quite fit.”

Ed will call the school’s facilities manager to request that the housing be painted.

Answering the school’s programmatic goal that “a reader ... be able to sense at once the building’s plan,” Kahn conceived the great central space as a hall of knowledge. A student could see the expanse of books upon entering, make a selection, and then retreat to a private place sheltered by the brick walls that wrap around the central core like a built ruin.

1:11 The library is quiet. On Floor 2, sunlight floods in through the windows in the white-oak study carrels set along the outside walls. Three girls sit at a table, studying together. Piles of books and notebooks, Machiavelli, a yellow highlighter.

1:15 In an empty carrel, a little stack of old books with faded gilt-printed spines: Thucydides, Herodotus.

1:31 In the second-floor ladies’ room, two sinks that don’t match, two faucets that don’t match, two soap dispensers that don’t work. This building, whose public spaces reflect such careful stewardship, aches a little in private, feeling its age.


On November 16, 1971, the school suspended classes so that the books could be transferred from the old library into Kahn’s new building. The students lined up, forming a human chain, and passed boxes of books from hand to hand.

4:06 Another Junior Studies tour. The librarian explains that because the school hadn’t gone co-ed yet in the late ’60s, Kahn’s design included only one bathroom per floor. When Exeter admitted girls, the school didn’t want to add new bathrooms, and decided to alternate, designating a women’s room on every other floor. “So you see, you plan for what you think is the future, and then it all changes.”

4:25 The librarian points out the microfilm-viewing machine. “Did that come before the floppy disk?” a kid asks earnestly.

4:29 The tour has reached the ground-floor periodicals room, where a group of
well-dressed alumni are chatting over tea. “That’s what you’re going to be like in 50 years,” the librarian murmurs as the ninth-graders file into the room, “so be kind to them.”

4:40 Ed takes the alumni group on a tour. The route is the same as the Junior Studies tour, but the group’s questions are different. A lot of them are about money: how much the library cost to build and what it costs to run.

8:22 Lights blaze from all the windows. Inside, people are studying everywhere, alone and in groups. On Floor 3, the blue couches in an open lounge space are crammed with kids. One boy ends a phone call and turns to his friends. “She’s coming over to work.”

Another boy: “Do you think she’s hot?” “Well, if she threw herself at me, I’d — um —” “You wouldn’t say no.” “But I hope she’s coming over here to work,” the first boy says anxiously, “because I really do have to work.”

9:12 One of the librarians takes the elevator up to the fourth floor to start the final evening walk-through. She locks the Special Collections room, the Lamont poetry room, the stairwell door.

9:15 Down the stairs to Floor 3M, where she walks around the periphery. It’s silent except for her hushed footsteps on the carpet.

9:17 Floor 3. A boy and girl close their books as the librarian walks by.

9:19 Floor 2M. Another boy and girl in a carrel, packing up papers.

9:21 Floor 2. Three girls packing up.

9:23 Floor 1M. The corridor, the bathroom that flooded, the little paperbacks room where the plumber stopped to look at a book. The ritual circling of the walk-through has a Goodnight Moon feeling — a last look at all the sites of the day’s activities, gone quiet now.

9:25 The basement. The librarian opens the door of one of the old typing rooms — no one even remembers now that this was what these little enclosed rooms were designed for — where a boy in earphones is oblivious to sound and the passage of time. “We’ll be closing in five minutes.”

9:29 A great buzzing thud as all the lights in the stacks go out. The great cut-out circles are black. Sneakers squeal across the travertine as the last few students leave. The librarian looks at her watch.

9:30 Another huge buzz and thump. The central space goes dark. The rich content of the library is erased. Now, in the dark, the space is about emptiness. The building has transformed itself into Kahn’s original concept of a ruin, a place of vastness and shadow.

A note from Joan Wickersham: With this story I am wrapping up The Lurker, the column I have written for ArchitectureBoston since 2004. I have loved writing these pieces and thank you all for reading them! www.joanwickersham.com