

Louis I. Kahn



Louis Isadore Kahn (1901-1974).

Born in Pärnu, Estonia in 1901 of Jewish heritage, he immigrated with his family to the United States at age 5, settling in Philadelphia. Kahn exhibited artistic talent and eventually chose a career in architecture, graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1924.

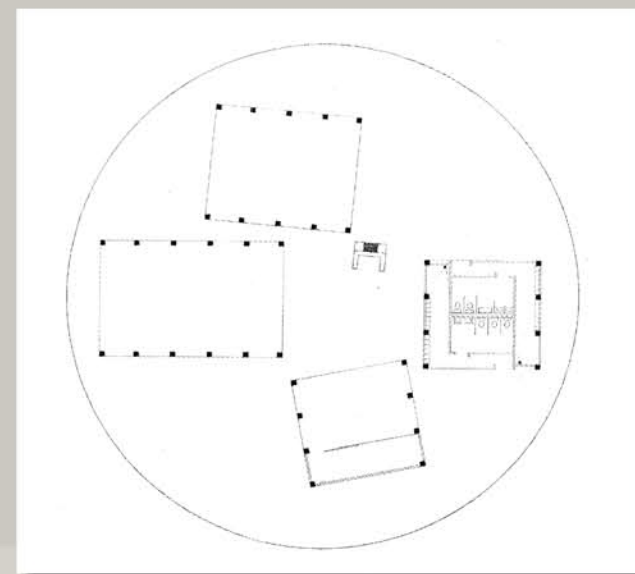
Kahn's best-known works did not come until later in life. Influenced by ancient ruins in Italy, Greece and Egypt, he created a style that blended modern materials with classical architecture, always with reference to the landscape. The Trenton Bath House, built in 1955, was considered by Kahn, and others, to profoundly influence all his later work.

From 1957 until his death, Kahn taught at the University of Pennsylvania where he continued to cultivate new ideas and designs. He also maintained a private practice and completed such important commissions as the Salk Institute (1959-65) in La Jolla, California, the Kimbell Art Museum (1966-72) in Fort Worth, Texas, and Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, capitol of Bangladesh (1962-83) in Dhaka.

Throughout, the Trenton Bath House retained a special status in Kahn's body of work, the place where he first recognized the possibility of renewing modern architecture by referencing the ancient past.

Louis I. Kahn is regarded as one of America's greatest 20th-century architects. The unassuming building before you, the Trenton Bath House, is one of his most important works.

Born in Pärnu, Estonia in 1901 of Jewish heritage, he immigrated with his family to the United States at age 5, settling in Philadelphia.



Louis I. Kahn, Plan of the Day Camp Pavilions, 1957. Kahn referred to the day camp as "a little acropolis." The Day Camp, part of the overall JCC campus design, is composed of four rectangular pavilions within a defined circular landscape all within a grove of trees.

The Bath House



Atrium at the center of the Bath House with stairs leading to the pool, ca.1956.

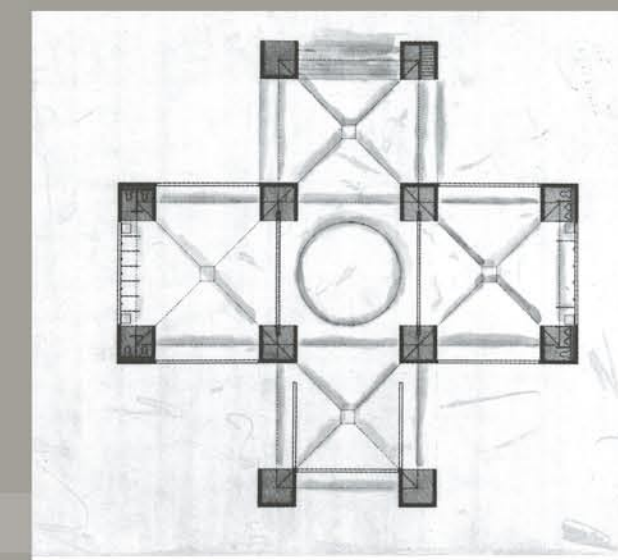
natural light from above completing a simple fresh-air ventilation system.

The overall plan is a symmetrical Greek cross made up of four square rooms and a central atrium. Each of the four square rooms has hollow corner piers that provide spaces for circulation, storage and roof supports. Shortly before opening day, Kahn and associate Marie Kwo painted a mural marking the Bath House entrance, which otherwise would be hidden. In 2010, the mural was replicated as part of the overall Bath House restoration project.

Working out the Bath House design led Kahn to a guiding principle that some spaces were more important than others. It was the order and relationship of architectural elements or spaces, like those in the corners of the Bath House, that brought a higher order and function to the primary form or space. Kahn later famously described this concept as "servant" and "served" spaces.

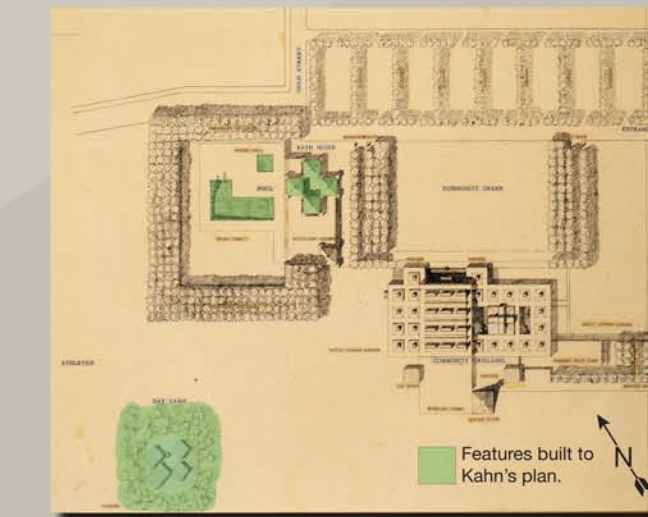
Louis I. Kahn's Trenton Bath House draws inspiration from ancient geometric forms, yet makes use of simple inexpensive modern materials in a dignified way.

The wood-frame hipped roofs of the Bath House form a composition of primitive-looking domes. They seem to float above the concrete-block walls, with a gap between the eave and the wall providing for clerestory lighting. The square-shaped openings (oculi) bring in



Bath House floor plan, 1955. Each of the four rooms serves a specific purpose. The lower room is the "basket room", where bathers check their clothes. The women's and men's dressing rooms are left and right, and the upper square is an open-sided pavilion that ceremonially leads to the pool.

The JCC



Kahn's JCC Site Plan, 1957. The Bath House and pool (top left) and the Day Camp (bottom left) indicate features of his plan that were built. The other features on the plan consisting of a community building, community green, parking lot, snack bar and landscape were not built. The Community Building seen on site today was designed by others and completed in 1962 after Kahn left the project.

In the 1910s, a Young Men's and Women's Hebrew Association was established in downtown Trenton. The Trenton Y was a place to socialize, exercise and learn about and celebrate Jewish-American culture. In the late 1940s, the Trenton Y decided to build a campus outside the city. This was part of a nationwide movement to create suburban Jewish Community Centers (JCC's). In 1954, the Trenton JCC purchased this property in Ewing Township and shortly after hired Louis I. Kahn to design a campus complete with a community center building, day camp, pool, snack bar, playing fields and parking.

Kahn went through many iterations of rearranging building and landscape elements before arriving at the final 1957 campus plan. Kahn was deliberate in the placement of trees to create outdoor rooms, and in the relationship of buildings to these landscape features. The interrelationship of all the campus elements was expressed in a defined geometry displayed in the overall plan. The effect was an ordered but natural site that guided the visitor and encouraged exploration and play.

The Community Building, the largest and most expensive of the structures, was placed on hold until funds could be raised, but the Bath House was executed quickly, opening in the summer of 1955. A second phase of construction, the Day Camp Pavilions, was completed to the west of the Bath House in 1957. Kahn's original design for a community green and landscaping along with a parking lot and snack bar was never constructed as he planned. The Community Building designed by Kelly and Gruzen was completed in 1962.



Day Camp Pavilions, 2013. The pavilions are located about 500 feet to the left of this sign.

"Now when I did the bath house, the Trenton Bath House, I discovered a very simple thing. I discovered that certain spaces are very unimportant and some spaces are the real raison d'être for doing what you're doing."

Louis I. Kahn



Restoration of the Bath House and Day Camp Pavilions was completed in 2011. Funding has been made possible in part by the Garden State Historic Preservation Trust Fund administered by the New Jersey Historic Trust/State of New Jersey and the Mercer County Open Space Preservation Trust. Sign Design by Hunter Research, Inc. Image Credits: Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission; John Ebstel; George Pohl; Mercer County Planning Division.

To learn more about the history of the JCC, the Bath House and Louis I. Kahn, visit www.kahntrentonbathhouse.org.



1954

The Jewish Community Center (JCC) purchases a site in Ewing Township, a suburb of Trenton. Louis I. Kahn is hired as architect.



Architect Louis I. Kahn (third from right) showing models to members of the JCC construction committee, March 1955.



The pool at the Trenton Bath House, ca. 1960.



The Day Camp Pavilions were part of Kahn's JCC campus. Two of the most deteriorated of the four pavilions were fully documented, demolished and then reconstructed as part of a restoration project in 2010.

1957

Day Camp Pavilions open. Kahn's understated design draws inspiration from Greek temples.

A Center for Every Family...

To most of the people who come to this pool, it is simply a great place to swim and cool off. But others travel long distances simply to see the building at the pool's entrance. Known as the Louis I. Kahn Bath House, it is a world-famous architectural landmark.

The Bath House and the pool opened in 1955, the first phase of development of the JCC campus. The history of how the Bath House came to be built here is closely tied to national patterns of suburban growth and the JCC movement. Early in the 20th century, Trenton's immigrant Jewish community centered around a neighborhood of row houses just south of downtown sometimes referred to as "Jew Town." This was where Trenton's first Jewish Y, later to be the JCC, was established. In the 1950s, across the country JCCs were being built in the suburbs to meet the needs of the new families living there. The campuses provided opportunities for education, socialization, Jewish-identity building, as well as recreational programs, for people of all ages and backgrounds.



Rendering of the JCC site by Louis I. Kahn, 1957. View looking west across a proposed Community Green with the Community Building in the distance. The Bath House is at right. The Community Building designed by Kahn and depicted here was never built.

In 1954, the JCC acquired nearly 40 acres of land, convenient to where many of Trenton's middle-class Jews were moving, and engaged architect Louis I. Kahn to design a campus. The JCC campus would ultimately offer programs similar to other centers across the nation, including cultural spaces such as an auditorium, a gymnasium, a nursery school, an outdoor pool, a snack bar and a day camp.

“Architecture is the thoughtful making of space.”

Louis I. Kahn

A Place in The Sun

When the JCC hired Louis I. Kahn, he was not yet a world-renowned architect. Between 1955 and 1959, he worked with the JCC continually refining plans for the campus design and fulfilling his own evolving architectural vision. It was here that Kahn discovered many of the ideas that would guide his later work. During this time, Kahn began work on the landmark Richards Medical Center (1957-65) in Philadelphia and the Salk Institute (1959-65) in La Jolla, California.

Unfortunately, Kahn was unable to see his comprehensive plan for the JCC campus to full completion. The Bath House, pool and the Day Camp Pavilions were built under Kahn's direction, but the Community Building was designed by another architectural firm and plans for the landscape were never realized. Kahn's reluctance to commit to a final design and budget constraints contributed to his dismissal from the JCC project.

The JCC was a place to learn, meet, swim, camp and play. While the architectural world increasingly took note of its significance, the JCC enjoyed the fruit of Kahn's labor for the next 50 years.



In 2006, the JCC sold this facility to build a new campus that would meet the present-day needs of its members, repeating a pattern of following its community to up-and-coming residential areas. Beginning in 2007, Mercer County and Ewing Township acquired the property, and then restored Kahn's landmark structures, built a new snack bar, and constructed a representative landscape sympathetic to Kahn's original design. Today, the property functions as a senior and community center with a pool and day camp, much as it did when it first opened. It welcomes visitors from around the world who take a special trip to visit an architectural icon that transcends time and culture.

1955

The Trenton Bath House opens along with the pool. This is the first phase of the JCC complex.



Trenton Bath House, shortly after completion.



Opening day at the JCC campus, 1955.



Bath House restoration, 2010.

2007

Mercer County acquires the JCC property and begins restoration of the Bath House and Day Camp Pavilions and construction of a new snack bar and Plaza.



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