



Salk Institute

Louis Kahn · La Jolla, CA · 1963

A talisman for the ingenuity of the human spirit, Louis Kahn's Salk Institute is made of volcanic aggregate, giving the site an otherworldly quality.

Louis Kahn's Salk Institute, a laboratory complex perched above 27 acres (11 hectares) of coastal bluffs in La Jolla, San Diego, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, is an exercise in perfect symmetry. Call it the Taj Mahal of brutalism. And it all began in 1960, when Jonas Salk, developer of the Polio vaccine, asked Kahn to "create a facility worthy of a visit by Picasso."

Here, two mirror-image rectangular structures, six stories tall, clad in raw poured-in-place concrete and unfinished teak, line an open travertine courtyard, whose linear reflecting pool pulls water, light, and energy toward the sea. Five research wings attach, via floating bridges, to each building's courtyard side, their facades angled to the ocean, adding a sense of formal syncopation. When standing in the middle of these two symmetrical structures, the effect is cinematic, like being on the set of a science fiction movie.

The reflecting pool and treeless court were conceived by Mexican architect Luis Barragán, whom Kahn had asked to help select his garden court's trees. Barragán urged Kahn to "not add one leaf, nor plant, not one flower, nor dirt. Instead make it a plaza with a single water feature ... If you make a plaza, you will have a facade to the sky."

Salk called for large open laboratories that could adapt to changing needs. Kahn's robust concrete frame allows for column-free spaces, 65 feet (20 meters) wide and 245 feet (75 meters) long. Robust double-strength glass panes flood the interior with light, and support systems are confined to full-height service spaces between each lab floor. "Pozzolanic" concrete, a volcanic pumice aggregate, gives the building a gray yet warm hue. Sunken planted light wells help illuminate lower-level laboratories too.

Through this material, the institute is imbued with a quality that is at once classical and otherworldly. From a distance, the compound resembles a Mesoamerican temple.

Indeed, there's something vital about the Salk Institute's composition—its symmetry, hulking mass, and connection to the central channel, the sky above, as well as the scene in the distance—that fills visitors with awe. While serene, it still overflows with vibrancy. Nearby, hang gliders launch themselves off the adjacent cliffs. "A building is a symbol, as much as an object," Kahn once astutely remarked. Indeed, the Salk Institute symbolizes a profound harmony between nature, science, and the ingenuity of the human spirit.

Salk's linear water channel empties into stepped reflecting pools.