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ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

Two Architects Have a Meeting of the Minds at a Texas Museum

A rendering of the lobby in Renzo Piano's ethereal glass addition to Kimbell Art Museum, a Louis Kahn masterpiece of Modern architecture, in Fort Worth.

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF

It's fair to ask if Renzo Piano was fully sane when he agreed to design the addition to Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum.



Kahn occupies a privileged place within the pantheon of America's great architects, and the Kimbell in Fort Worth, completed in 1972, is his masterpiece. Adding to the pressure, major museum expansions were increasingly coming under fire as wasteful expressions of gilded-age hubris. Mr. Piano is likely to be vilified by both architecture fans and art world purists no matter what he comes up with.

It's true that Mr. Piano's design, which will be officially unveiled on Thursday, is not as transcendent a work of architecture as the original Kimbell. Nor does it quite live up to his own masterpiece, the 1987 Menil Collection building in Houston. But Mr. Piano has managed to find that magical and elusive balance between respecting a great work and adhering to one's own aesthetic convictions. Unlike some of his contemporaries, who might have sought to play up the generational divide, Mr. Piano, who worked for Kahn early in his career, builds his design on the touching, if idealistic, notion of a civilized conversation across the ages.

Kahn's mythic stature in American architecture is matched only by that of Frank Lloyd Wright; and even Wright is less likely to be spoken of with such reverence. The architectural historian Vincent Scully, Kahn's most ardent promoter, once claimed that he was "the hinge on which Modernism turned." His pure geometric forms were infused with an aura of silence, and they had as much to do with Roman precedents as with the late Modernist period he worked in. Far from mental abstractions, they were meant to be touched; their solemn surfaces of concrete, stone or brick carried the weight of history.



The original Louis Kahn portion of the museum, which opened in 1972.

The Kimbell in particular — a low building consisting of five parallel vaulted galleries that can be divided with a system of temporary partitions — seems to reach back through the 20th century all the way to antiquity. But what makes it a truly extraordinary building is its relationship to light. Kahn wanted light to spill down into each gallery through an uninterrupted central slot that ran the entire length of each vaulted ceiling, an approach that seemed to defy the laws of structure.

The spine of a vault is crucial to its support; when it is removed, in theory, the vault should collapse. Kahn's solution was to embed post-stressed tension cables inside the concrete on either side of the vault, making them self-supporting. A curved aluminum reflector was suspended underneath the slot, so that sunlight was reflected back up onto the ceiling's interior, washing down its surface to illuminate the artworks and give the rooms a mystical serenity.

When the Kimbell first proposed an addition, in the late 1980s, the notion provoked a national outcry. The scheme, by Romaldo Giurgola, would have significantly extended Kahn's vaults at either end of the existing building, as if the original had been designed for assembly line production rather than as a self-contained composition. (An old professor of mine compared the approach to extruding sausage.)

Mr. Piano's addition, which is scheduled to break ground this summer, is set 90 feet to the west of Kahn's building, on what is currently a vast lawn dotted with trees. Roughly the same proportions as its neighbor, it is set directly on axis with Kahn's front entry. Two nearly identical gallery spaces flank a glass-enclosed lobby; a second structure, tucked behind this one and partially underground, houses an auditorium, a library and more galleries.

Mr. Piano invested a great deal of creative energy fine-tuning the relationship between his building and the old one, which will face each other across a shallow reflecting pool. Most visitors will arrive through a new parking garage buried underneath this pool and ride an elevator or take one of two broad staircases up to the front of the addition. In a nod of respect to Kahn, Mr. Piano has oriented both the stairs and the elevator to the east, so that as you emerge at ground level, your first view is of the vaulted arcades of the Kimbell's main entry facade rather than of his own building. From there you turn back into the addition or proceed along a more drawn out and ceremonial route around the reflecting pool and into the original museum.

As with all such additions, there are some painful trade-offs. The main entry to Kahn's museum is a perfect sequence of outdoor spaces: the few shallow steps up from the lawn, the lines of oak trees, the twin arcades fronted by narrow reflecting pools. To anyone who has walked this route the sense of inner quiet is unforgettable; and that experience will now be partly lost.

On the other hand, the placement of Mr. Piano's addition corrects one of the Kimbell's few flaws, which had to do with Kahn's misreading of Texas car culture. Although he expected visitors to enter across the lawn in front of his building, most enter from the back, where the parking is, and miss out on one of the most beautiful aspects of Kahn's design. Mr. Piano reorients the approach to where it should be.

His respect for Kahn's masterwork, in which one can feel Mr. Piano reworking Kahn's ideas over and over in his head, is obvious in the interiors as well. Approaching from the new reflecting pool, visitors will be able to look straight through the glass walls of the addition's lobby to a



A rendering of Renzo Piano's south facade for the museum's addition.

strip of garden running behind, and beyond that to the glass-walled, 295-seat auditorium — a visual sequence that offers a richly layered counterpoint to Kahn's outdoor entry. Inside, the layout of the main galleries on either side of the lobby mirrors Kahn's plan. And by partly burying the auditorium, library and secondary galleries in back, underneath a mound of grass, Mr. Piano keeps his building from dominating the site. Even the choice of material — ethereal glass as opposed to Kahn's concrete and travertine — suggests deference, making the addition a ghostly twin of the original.

The scariest challenge of the project, surely, was trying to create a roof structure that could hold up against Kahn's vaults. Mr. Piano too is celebrated as one of the great masters of light; the curved louvers of the Menil Collection have been studied as attentively by architects as the Kimbell's roof structure. Here, working with the engineer Guy Nordenson, Mr. Piano creates a system of twinned wood beams supported on concrete pillars. A complex system of fabric scrims, glass panels and metal louvers rests on top of this frame, creating a highly refined light-regulating machine.

We'll have to wait until the building is complete to know if its light will be as gorgeous as that in the original Kimbell. For now the biggest criticism is likely to be about whether Mr. Piano is being too worshipful of Kahn's genius. Just as Kahn's gods were the builders of antiquity, Mr. Piano's are the visionaries of the last century, Kahn among them, and that's certainly evident here. But then again, if you're going to worship anybody, why not Kahn?