

Perched above the Pacific Ocean in La Jolla, California, a San Diego community, the Salk Institute for Biological Studies occupies its rocky cliff.

It's been said, Jonas Salk visited American architect Louis Kahn in 1959 merely to ask for his advice but was so inspired by their conversation he hired Kahn. Louis Kahn (1901-1974) was an American architect who worked in the monumental style and created works that are awe-inspiring.

Salk required that the design for this new facility should explore the implications of the sciences for humanity. He also had a broader directive for his chosen architect: to "create a facility worthy of a visit by Picasso." Salk also laid down a series of more practical requirements. The entire structure was to be simple and durable, requiring minimal maintenance. At the same time, it was to be bright and welcoming.

Kahn's idea for the Institute is spatially laid out in a similar way to a monastery which can be described as a secluded intellectual community. Three zones were to stand apart, all facing the ocean to the west: the Meeting House, the Village, and the laboratories. Ultimately, the Meeting House and Village were cut from the project, and only the laboratories were built

The laboratories of the Salk Institute were designed as two elongated blocks mirroring each other across a paved plaza. The central court is lined by a series of detached towers whose diagonal protrusions allow for windows facing westward onto the ocean. These towers are connected to the rectangular laboratory blocks by small bridges, providing passage across the rifts of the two sunken courts which allow natural light to enter into the research spaces below. Kahn included these courts not only as light wells, but as references to the cloisters of the monastery of St. Francis of Assisi – an example for which Salk had previously expressed his admiration.

Between the rhythmically-spaced study towers is a nearly featureless expanse of off-white travertine stone. Kahn initially planned to fill the space with a garden but was convinced by architect Luis Barragán to leave the space as a void. A thin channel of water divides the plaza, drawing one's eye toward the blue horizon. The unfinished concrete which forms the walls of the Institute is nearly identical in color to the travertine in the square, lending the space a primitive and almost sublime monumentality. Inset teak paneling identifies the locations of study and office windows, providing the only material relief from the monolithic concrete and stone used throughout the Institute. With its flexible design and interplay of material and space, the Salk Institute is likely to retain its significance as both a research center and an architectural wonder far into the future.