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Up early on a wintry Saturday morning, you decide to take the car up to Portland (Maine) to spend the day touring the gorgeous coast of New England, when?

'Oh, wait!'

'Yeah, yeah.'

While making a coffee and grabbing a few things, a quick Google of the route reveals that if you take a small detour from the route you'll find one of Louis Khan's legendary buildings. What we architects do from professional bias is nothing new to those used to living with us? So off we head for Exeter (New Hampshire). The immediate impression on arriving is that the little town has grown up around this university complex that occupies the most central part of the current urban layout, almost certainly the first urban development here in the late 19th

century. Today, its position is quite central.

An American football stadium and as many tennis courts as you could wish for, comfortably bolstered by a collection of student buildings from the early 20th century. The whole is very representative of the Georgian architecture of New England. Yet amid the student complex appears this red brick cube with cropped edges and a seeming desire to close itself off from its immediate surroundings. Protected, yet permeable.

Yes, it's the Exeter Library (Class of 1945 Library) by Louis Khan (1972).

The entrance, via a grand stone stairway, leads you to the first floor where there is an immense atrium topped by a huge clerestory, from which all the floors of the library branch off. A master of spatial hierarchy, Khan organised the vertical service spaces in two of the corner of the building. The floors alternate between full floors and mezzanines, providing study spaces in the double-height areas created at the facade. The quality of the space generated, with the specific design of each student desk that in itself forms part of the module of wooden window frame surrounds, combined with the inpouring of natural light that penetrates the spaces, confers a sense of lightness and ease to studying that I have never experienced before.

It may be that the best thing you could possibly do at Exeter is study.

On every floor that gives onto the central atrium, reading tables invite you to admire the circular structure surrounding you. This concrete core, where anything that is not actually structural is finished in wood, is illuminated by the huge clerestory topping the atrium. The sensation of height and silence is almost monastic.

Visiting with someone who is passionate about photography turned this little detour from the Saturday plan into an unexpected treat. Both of us will remember it for the magic of the building and the excellent photographic material that arose from it. Simply inspirational.

A few kilometres further on is Frank Lloyd Wright's Zimmerman House. But, luckily for my companion, it wasn't open and we managed to spend at least half the day where we had initially planned, in Portland. By way of an anecdote, I can report that you can eat very well in Portland, but if you're passing through you won't remember it for its attractive architecture or urban sensibilities. It's always a good idea to deviate a little from the planned route? You never know what you might find!

Esteve Solà, architect. COAC correspondent in San Francisco, USA



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