



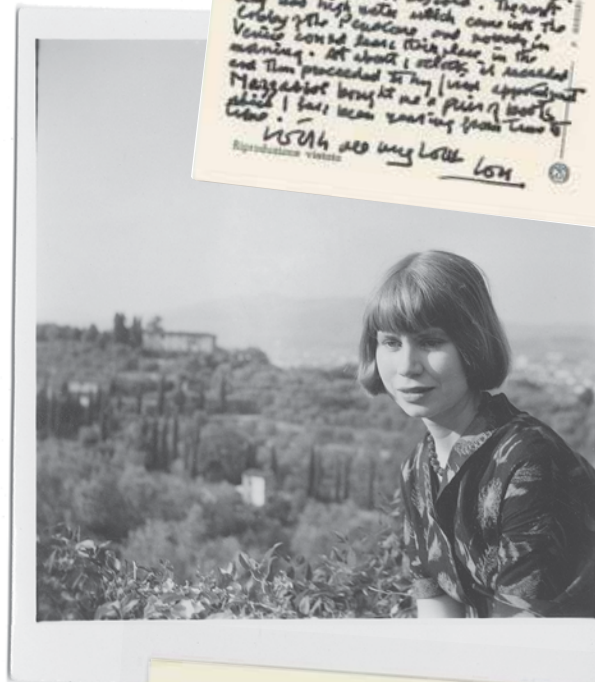
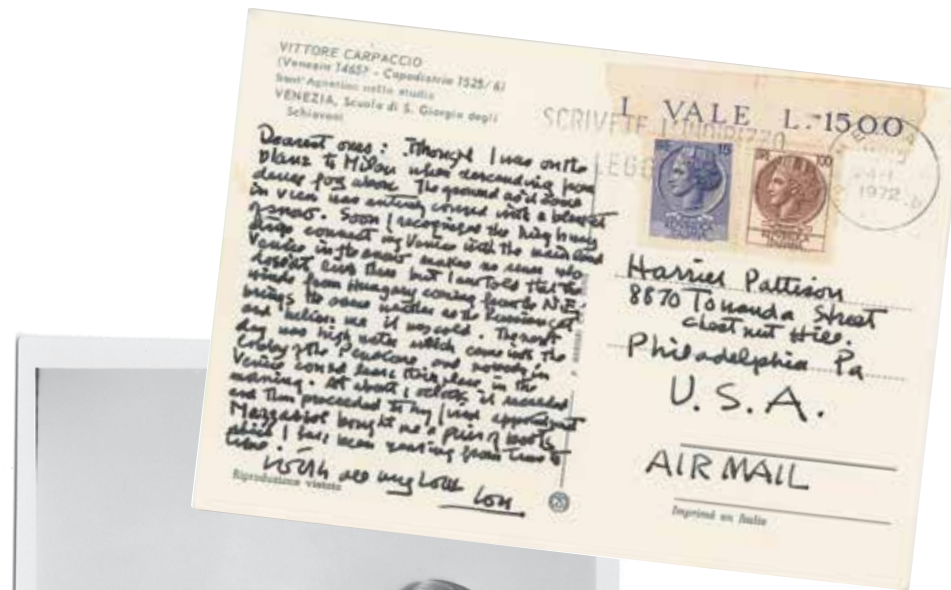
**THIS SPREAD**  
A sample of Louis Kahn's many postcards to Harriet Pattison, FASLA, over the course of their 15-year relationship. His correspondence often carried sketches from his travels to projects in South Asia and Europe.

**OPPOSITE CENTER**  
Harriet Pattison in Tuscany, 1953, after she graduated from Yale.

# LOVE, LOU

**HARRIET PATTISON REFLECTS ON HER LIFE IN LANDSCAPE.**

BY JENNIFER REUT



For too long, Harriet Pattison, FASLA, has been known largely through her personal and professional association with the architect Louis Kahn, an alliance that has often obscured her own story, even as it elevated it. Reading her new book, *Our Days Are Like Full Years: A Memoir with Letters from Louis Kahn* (Yale University Press, 2020), leaves behind a powerful impression of a woman who lived unconventionally, and often uncertainly, but always knew her own mind.

The book is primarily drawn from Kahn's frequent correspondence over the 15 years of their relationship, with Pattison unfurling her story in the interstices. Kahn, married, and in the fullness of a celebrated career, met the much younger Pattison when he lectured at Yale, where she was studying theater and art. The memoir narrates her life and their relationship primarily through his letters to her—dispatches full of sketches, impressions of people, and always, ideas and perspectives on the places and projects that were





piling up on his desk during this period. The letters from Kahn are linked together by Pattison's narrative and an abundance of beautifully reproduced correspondences, drawings, and photographs. Though the letters are Kahn's, from the whole, Pattison's own story emerges.

From her apprenticeship in Dan Kiley's office (generous, kind) through graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania under Ian McHarg (cranky, demanding), and always with Kahn's encouragement, Pattison pursued a career in landscape architecture. Although many fellow students were younger, and most were men in the 1960s, Pattison charted her own course into the profession as a single mother of Nathaniel, her young son with Kahn. In an e-mail, Pattison reflected on how she found the confidence to stay focused: "I started on my career late, had a child to care for, and simply, *had* to succeed. Necessity and love for what I was doing gave me the courage I needed."

**BELOW**  
Pattison's first job after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania was with the office of George Patton (far left), in the same building as Kahn's office in Philadelphia.

**OPPOSITE**  
An early design for a playground in Wayne, Pennsylvania, designed by Pattison while in Patton's office, features varied topography and open-ended play elements.

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As she recounts in her oral history, collected by the Cultural Landscape Foundation as part of its Pioneers of American Landscape Design series, Pattison was powerfully influenced by the wilder landscapes of Maine, where she spent her summers, and less so by the midwestern landscapes of Chicago, where she grew up. This, combined with her long travels in Europe, honed a romantic landscape sensibility that was in harmony with Kahn's deeply spiritual approach to architecture. His letters provide an insight into his design process that is genuinely intimate, and Kahn's interest in her thoughts and eagerness to share what he has seen demonstrate the deep intellectual and creative bond between them.



THE BOOK IS DRAWN  
FROM KAHN'S  
CORRESPONDENCE,  
WITH PATTISON  
UNFURLING HER STORY  
IN THE INTERSTICES.

It is through her work in the office of George Patton that Pattison had the first opportunity to professionally contribute to Kahn's projects. When Patton is brought in on the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, Pattison is there. The drawings reproduced in the book, including one with Kahn's note to the client, help materialize the contribution she made to the landscape design of this iconic project.



I asked her what she felt most proud of in that project. She wrote, "I think my initial and final design suggestions for the Kimbell were especially



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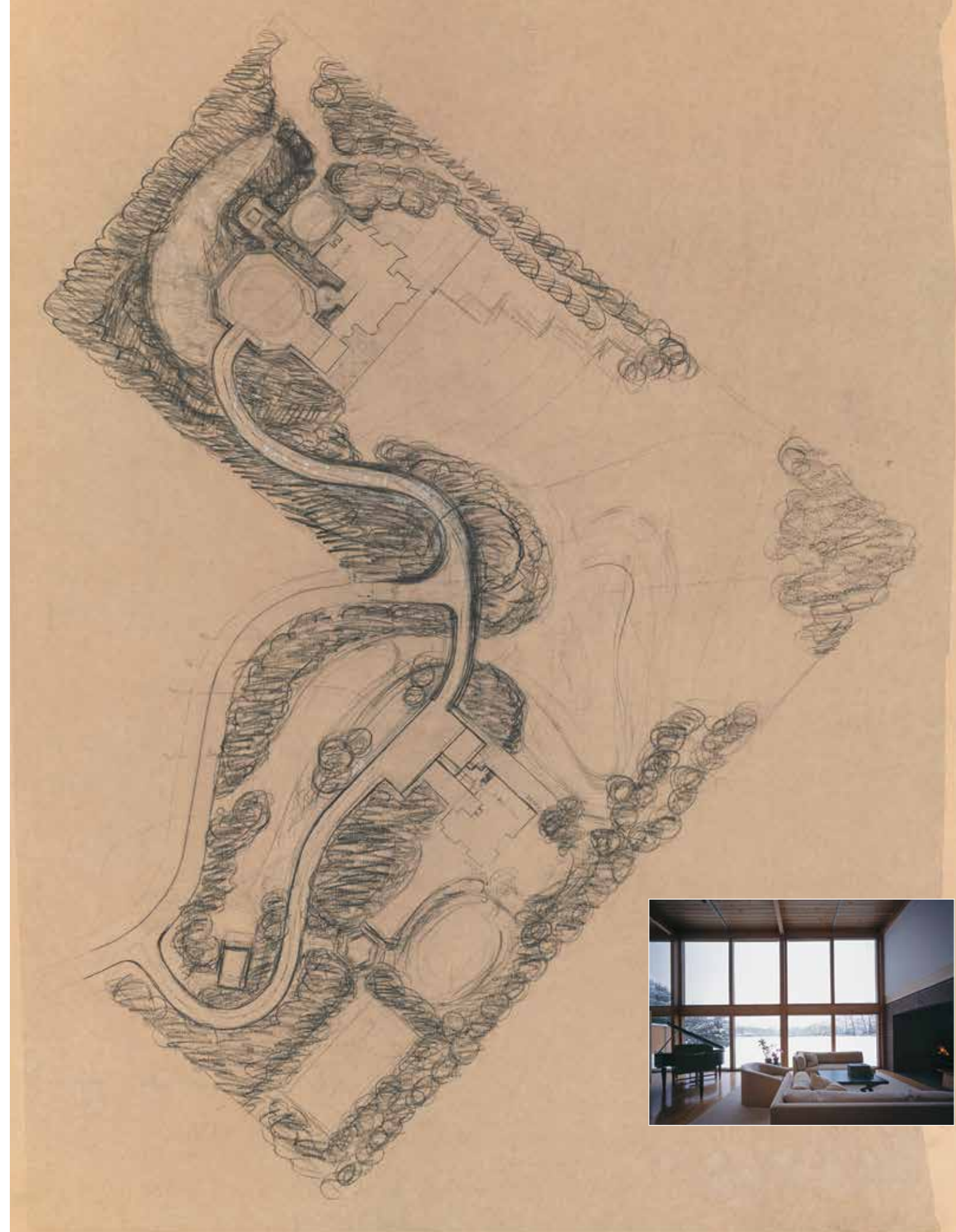
Kahn, left, and Pattison, right, photographed separately at the same party. The tension between Kahn's family with Pattison and his public life with his wife Esther was never resolved.

**OPPOSITE**

Pattison's master-plan sketch for Kahn's Honickman House (top) and Korman House (bottom) projects, done when she worked in his office in the early 1970s. Only the Korman House (inset) was built, set into Pattison's sculpted landscape.

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# “THE SITING OF THE BUILDING AND THE ODYSSEY OF WATER STAND OUT FOR ME.”

—HARRIET PATTISON, FASLA

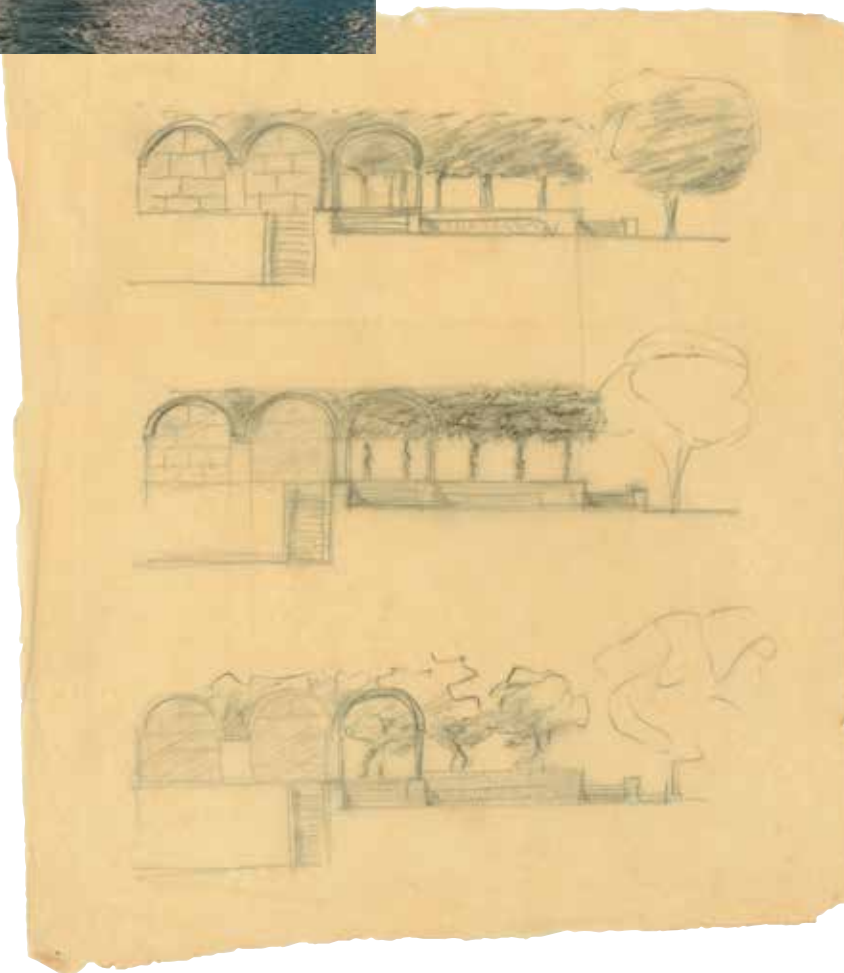


**LEFT**  
Pattison visited the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1985. Although the landscape design had been altered by a new addition, she was “filled with gratitude for having been a part of creating this place.”

**BELOW**  
A study by Pattison of planting options at the Kimbell’s entrance court.

**OPPOSITE**  
A site plan of the Kimbell from 1969 by Pattison with a note in Kahn’s hand to the client. It accompanied a narrative of the landscape that they composed together.

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important. In the beginning I proposed regrading the building site—taking Lou’s building off a plinth and embedding it into the land. This allowed us to take advantage of the 10-foot site differential as well as the existing tree alignments, and to create a dialogue with adjacent properties. These moves helped unify the building and landscape into a singular, narrative entity.”

“My final introduction was of the moving watercourse, ‘the odyssey of water,’ as Lou called it. This was the vibrant opposite of the placid pool Lou had first contemplated for the entry sequence. He loved the watercourse and we had great fun working on it. It was originally to be more extensive, ending in

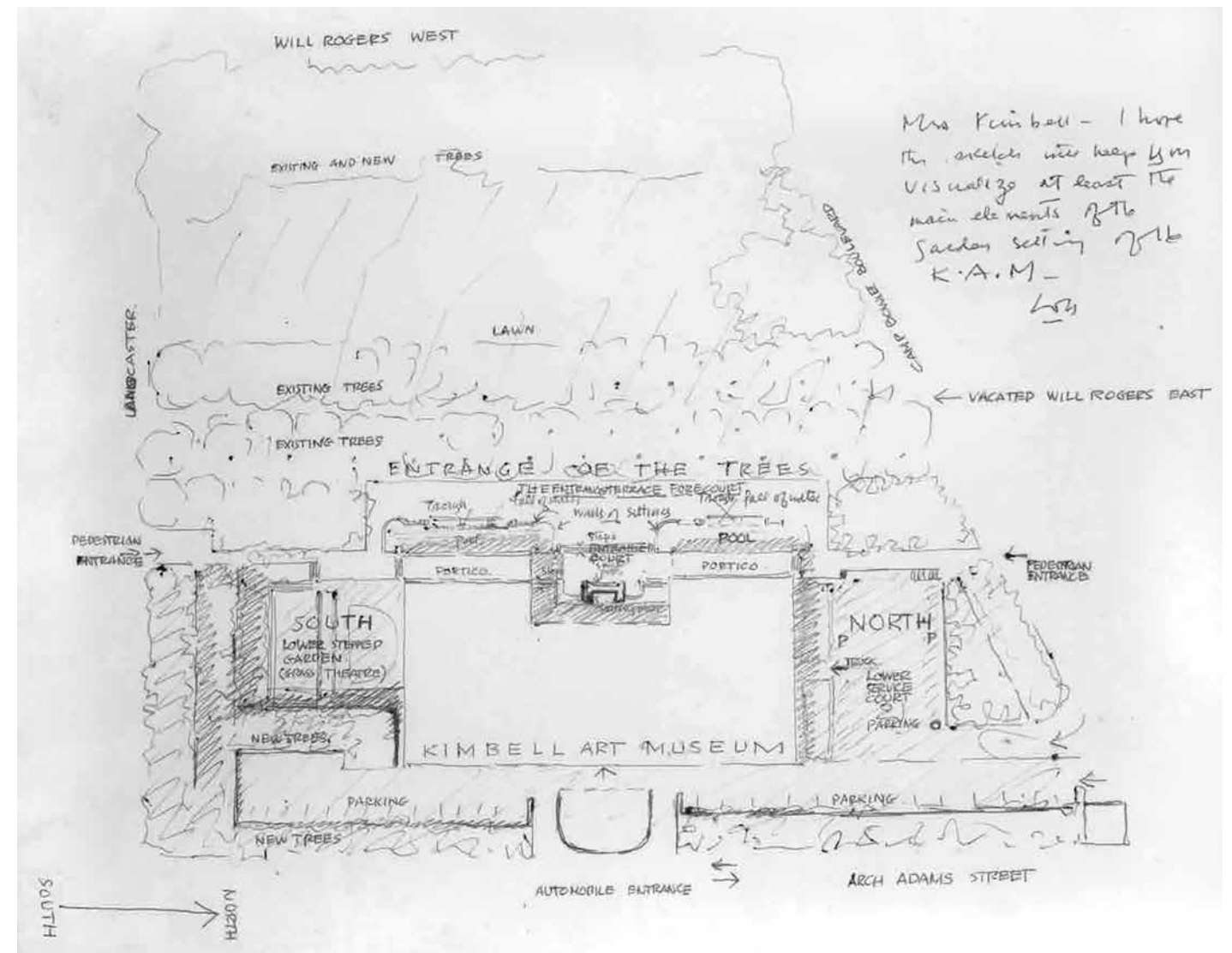
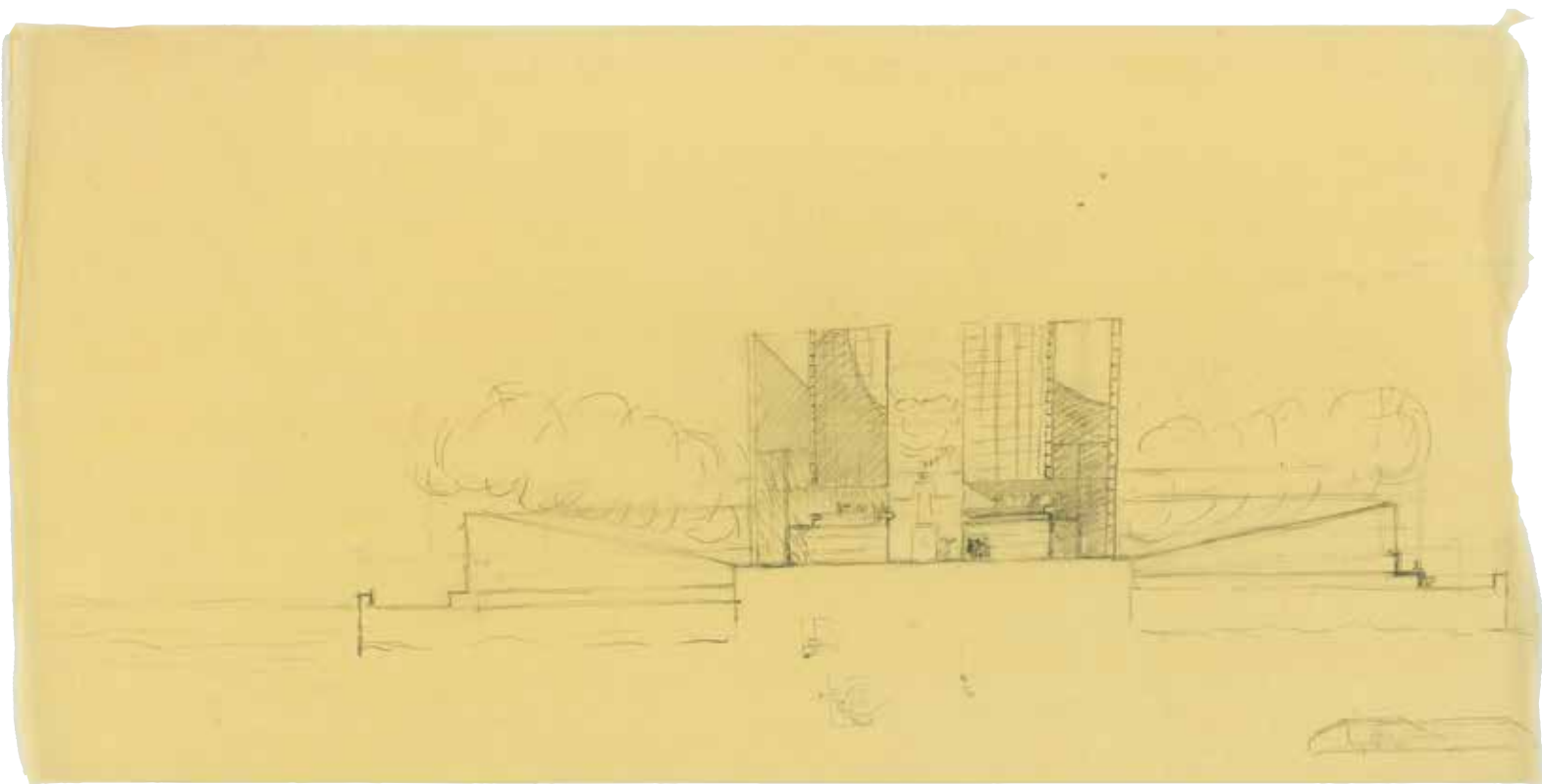


IMAGE REPRINTED, COURTESY THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM



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**RIGHT**

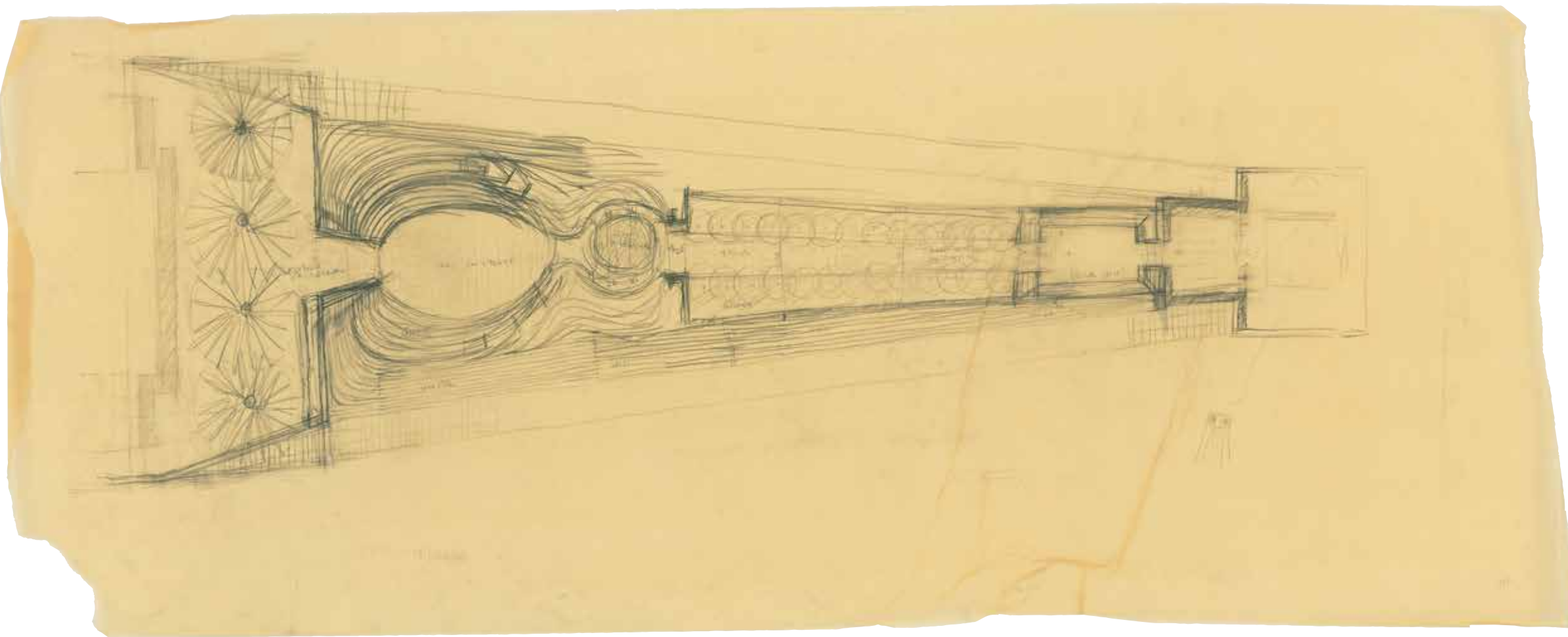
Harriet Pattison and her son, Nathaniel Kahn, in Maine in the late 1960s.

**OPPOSITE TOP**

Kahn's section of an early idea for the FDR memorial: a 60-foot-high cube and cylinder form in stainless steel.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**

An early iteration of the plan of the FDR memorial site by Pattison. The design would go through many revisions and years of languishing before opening in 2012.



a waterfall and pool in the theater garden.” While there were many other decisions along the way, “The siting of the building and the odyssey of water stand out for me.”

Pattison went on to work with Kahn on several projects, including the Korman House landscape and several unbuilt projects. Their final collaboration was the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park memorial in New York in the early 1970s, a project that was not realized until 2012, owing in part to Kahn’s unexpected death in 1974. In the design’s embrace of time and movement through the site, as well as in the rapport with the river and the city skyline, are echoes of their long and generative conversations. ●



“NECESSITY  
AND LOVE  
FOR WHAT  
I WAS DOING  
GAVE ME THE  
COURAGE  
I NEEDED.”

—HARRIET PATTISON, FASLA



**OPPOSITE**  
A photo of Pattison  
and Kahn taken by  
their son, Nathaniel,  
became the cover of  
her memoir, *Our Days  
Are Like Full Years*.

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