

# AKA History

Albert Kahn Associates, Inc. was founded in 1895 by the architect Albert Kahn, who became internationally renowned for his significant contributions to the construction industry. Kahn led the development of a new architecture that had a profound effect on the profession as well as society. He became one of the country's most innovative and influential architects. His rise coincided with and actually propelled the growth of U.S. industry, particularly for the auto industry in Detroit.

Nothing in architect Albert Kahn's early life suggested promise of fame or fortune. The son of poor German immigrants to the United States, Kahn arrived in Detroit in 1880 at the age of 11. The young boy had to take odd jobs to help support the family, so his formal schooling ended, and never resumed. The family's poverty also meant he could no longer continue his natural talent of playing the piano -- his early ability was so exceptional that by the age of seven he was considered a prodigy. Kahn then set his sights on becoming an artist, but that dream also ended when it was discovered that he was colorblind.



In 1884, at the age of 15, Kahn's life brightened. He got a job, without pay at first, at the excellent architectural firm of Mason & Rice. It was the firm's 26-year-old partner, George Mason, who took an interest in Kahn, encouraged him, and taught him to draft and sketch. This informal training continued when Kahn won a year's scholarship to study abroad, where he toured and sketched in Italy, France, Belgium and Germany with another aspiring architect, Henry Bacon, who would later design the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Kahn became America's foremost industrial architect, a niche his peers shunned. His rise coincided with -- and actually propelled -- the growth of U.S. industry, particularly for the auto industry in Detroit. The Kahn firm's industrial buildings are credited with pioneering the functionalism at the root of true European Modernism.

## **Architect for the "Car Guys"**

Kahn founded Albert Kahn Associates in 1895. Soon after, he designed Detroit's first large auto plants for the Packard Motor Car Company. It was for Packard's tenth building that Kahn gained recognition with his design of the first concrete-reinforced auto factory. Now, replacing the dangerous, inefficient, timber-framed plants widely used by the young automotive industry was Kahn's building: remarkably strong, fireproof, cheap to erect, with volumes of space unobstructed by interfering columns.



This accomplishment with Packard brought him to the attention of a man who would change his life: Henry Ford. Kahn designed Ford Motor Company's famous Highland Park plant, where Ford consolidated production of the Model T and perfected assembly line mass production. With the four-story plant, Kahn created an environment that was worker-friendly, with good lighting and ventilation -- much different than the dirty, dark and cramped plants that had preceded it. The Highland Park complex was the first of more than 1,000 commissions that began the lifelong collaboration of Albert Kahn and Henry Ford.



But Highland Park had its shortcomings. Production didn't flow; it moved between floors and even between buildings. So soon after, in his 1917 design of the landmark half-mile-long, glass-walled Ford Rouge plant, Kahn created Henry Ford's vision: an efficient plant where automated assembly lines flowed uninterrupted, all on one level, from raw materials to the finished car. The Rouge grew into the largest manufacturing complex in the U.S., with a force that peaked at 120,000 workers. By 1938, Kahn's firm was responsible for 20 percent of all architect-designed factories in the U.S.

### ***Industrializing the Soviet Union***

The impact of Kahn's work reached far outside the U.S. During the Great Depression, Kahn's firm assisted the Soviet government in its massive industrialization effort. Between 1930 and 1932, the firm's office in Moscow helped train more than 1,000 engineers and built 521 factories.

### ***Classical Masterpieces***

Not all of Kahn's achievements were industrial, however. His versatility encompassed nearly all building categories. Numerous honors were accorded him by fellow architects, competitors, and educators for his imaginative designs for hospitals, residences, banks, clubs, hotels, theaters, office buildings and laboratories. At the University of Michigan, Kahn's designs were classically inspired in the finely detailed Clements Library and the expansive, columned Angell Hall. In his design of the 28-story Fisher Building in Detroit, Kahn was given carte blanche by its auto-industry-rich owners and used 40 different varieties of marble and solid bronze trim for the public areas. In 1928, the Fisher building was honored by the Architecture League of New York as the year's most beautiful commercial structure.



### ***Helping make America the "Arsenal of Democracy"***

After designing the majority of the army airfield and many naval bases for the United States government during World War I, Kahn's swelled 600-person office was in the forefront in response to the demands of World War II. The final three years of his life alone entailed more than \$200 million in defense contracts, massive buildings that appeared almost overnight.



He designed and supervised construction of the six-million-square-foot Dodge Chicago Plant, which was leased by the government to the Dodge division of Chrysler for the production of B-25 bomber aircraft engines. The 80-acre facility was constructed in only six months, indicative of the breakneck speed and efficiency of American industry at the time.

The last major factory with which Kahn was involved was the Willow Run Bomber Plant in Ypsilanti, west of Detroit, where Ford Motor Company mass produced B-24 Liberator bombers. Because of the perceived threat of nighttime air attack, the assembly building was of blackout construction -- interior-placed production areas were lit entirely by electrical fixtures, which became standard practice.

With a day's work often stretching close to the 24-hour point, the strain of so much war work is said to have taken a toll on Kahn. His long, prolific career ended in 1942 with his death at the age of 73.