

Louis I. Kahn: Lessons From His Monumental Architecture in the Creation of Contemporary Social Spaces In and Around Large Buildings GA2015

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I. Introduction

“What was has always been. What is has always been. What will be has always been” [1].

“Nothingness mattered to him... silence mattered to him... the enigma of light mattered to him” [2].

Only a year out of architecture school Louis I. Kahn designed six enormous buildings for Philadelphia's 1926 exhibition marking the sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. With these temporary structures Kahn began a life-long love affair with monumental architecture (the six buildings totaled 579,000 square meters), and the ephemeral. Forty-one years after his passing this paper points to his extraordinary importance to contemporary architecture in the 21st century and beyond. Preeminent among his contributions was a concern for social space and the value of light to these spaces.

II. Eternal Echoes

Everything is a ruin in process and a ruin is a melancholy marker of the passage of time in both directions. Kahn's life was wrapped by a form of contented melancholy which found its way into his buildings as he came to wrap ruins around them. He gave us a singular view of the world and a thoroughly unique approach to the problem of architecture in time. Architecture speaks in silent symbols across time and Kahn understood that the experience of time is not only duration, but also silence, in the spaces of contemplation. He built his own monument to contemplation as part of one of his greatest buildings – the central plaza of the Salk Institute. Here architecture merges with the Pacific Coast in a way that elevates it to the status of inhabitable earth art. It is testimony to the incredible power of this architecture that it makes a person feel honored to be in the silent space he created.



Kahn's Salk Institute partakes of timelessness (incorporating the Pacific Ocean as part of the experience of a monumental building) while embracing the eternal challenge of silence to meaning. An architect with Kahn's impressive understanding of the past may produce works which extend not only the silence of architecture, but of his or her own inner body. In this way a great architect is called to live so much of his or her secret life publicly – and continue to do so after death. Everything which leads to such buildings results from decoding and manipulating ancient architectural symbols. This is the kind of architect Kahn trained himself to be during his travels to places such as San Gimignano in Italy where he made this water color in 1929.



Kahn's intimacy with the long-duree of architecture allowed him to appreciate the inscrutability of form. The mystery of matter involves its disappearance into forms and their reappearance as things remembered forward in dynamic ways by an architect. We see this in Kahn's thinking through and beyond the towers of San Gimignano in his *Medical Research Towers* in Philadelphia.



Such a remembering does not need to extend beyond a human scale when it is made manifest in contemporary buildings. The towers for Philadelphia began in his visit to the ancient columns at Karnac. He finds them in another form at San Gimignano and other medieval towns, and then, much later, he summoned them forward in his own work (as in this drawing he made at the Temple of Khons at Karnac in 1951).



Kahn was the kind of architect who possessed something of the shaman (or a guru) – one of a few individuals, from an immense human collectivity – dialoguing with, and remembering past experiences of the hot light and cool shade of monumental structures. As a shaman takes on attributes of animal spirits, Kahn took on some of the sadness of the ruin that is fundamental to this kind of architecture. This disposition led him to read ancient buildings as living books of architectural history and then to search for their footnotes spread out across vast tracts of space and time. Some of these footnotes now include his own buildings after he became the intermediary between matter and form, disappearance and reappearance, and space and place. He had a profound appreciation for the way forms reverberate – the echoes of matter as it appears and disappears across time. Kahn showed us that one of the roles of the architect is to register these echoes lest they pass forever into silence.



III. Other Energies

Cities are places of the dead and none moreso than New York which is a vast cemetery of architecture – immense vertical tombs full of failed solutions stand there row upon row. Buildings of the International Style and most other Modernisms stand like global grave markers to the many deaths of architecture's historical sense of creativity.



The worst crime of the International Style is to be found in its quest for neutrality – it is a way of seeking total security in real time, the time of the networks – evidenced in its fierce neutralization of diversity [3]. It culminated in an architecture of globalization which reached its apotheosis in the clone towers of the *World Trade Centre* – the perfect crime against form [4].

To travel overseas for Kahn was to travel back in time where he discovered new ideas and found solutions to contemporary problems. Sometimes he found ways of using contemporary technology to solve problems which were apparent, but unresolved, in the architecture of the past. His *Sher-e-Bangla Nagar* (the Parliament of Bangladesh), brought him as close as he ever would be to rediscovering ancient

ruins while reformulating them in a spectacular meeting of place and architectural space [5]. Never has an architect better understood what a place wanted to be or what a people needed from a place. This building, more than any other perhaps, participates in the eternity of the nothing and stands as one of its signal markers on planet earth – a profound meeting of past (in the exterior) and future (the concrete ceiling over the main assembly hall).



Kahn deployed, here and elsewhere, ancient ideas to respond to the silent challenge of the void. Architecture, as a kind of theory, is best deployed as challenge – a way of addressing the challenge of the void with an object when words are impossible. This building reminds me more than any other of Peter Smithson's claim that "architecture can charge the space around it with an energy which can join up with other energies, and influence the nature of things that might come..." [6].



Remarkably, the water in Bangladesh, as a result of an unsustainable global culture, will slowly rise and eventually submerge Kahn's greatest masterpiece along with most or all of the country. But even under water this masterwork will continue to *become* in the rarest possible manner and, when the waters finally recede, a most remarkable ruin will remain. The sweet sadness which followed Louis Kahn around during his life appears poised to haunt his memory well into the future. Sometimes the space wants the most unexpected thing – even to be submerged. Other energies

beyond the human and those of the architect are always present in the life of a building.

IV. A Suspicious Modern

Louis Kahn cast his perceptive and selective eye across the vastness of architectural time in a quest to bring forward ideas which could satisfy what much of his architectural contemporaries could only offend. In his search he found a way out of the dilemma of Modernism – the seeming impasse of being trapped in a uni-directional narrative of progress [7]. It was his desire that we stop trying to replicate the past through regurgitation, and that we should press old forms into new uses.

Kahn was the most suspicious of all the moderns – a vital revolutionary – one motivated by a desire to see architecture not become locked into technocratic models. The New York of Kahn's time had fallen under the spell of what Rem Koolhaas disparagingly refers to as “basic plan” (one floor after another stacked on top of the same – a kind of minimalist seriality of ascending boredom, a site plan repeated forty, seventy, or even one-hundred times – progress without soul, consensus without challenge). Kahn felt uncomfortable inside this metastatic architecture – this lapse of architectural reason – an architecture at high speed which seeks verification only in proliferation. He wanted to pull architecture out of speed. He preferred an architecture of thought, a mingling of ancient poetic forms that makes his ultra-modern structures much more old than new, yet strikingly contemporary – in a word, timeless.

Kahn made a direct challenge to aesthetics to speak respectfully to the void while moving away from Modernism's unfortunate tendency to recycle itself. If it is possible to make a non-aesthetic challenge to aesthetics, Kahn achieved it with bricks and the use of bare and unfinished concrete. I think that these materials allowed Kahn to point to a new kind of aesthetic for his time. The challenge of the void in the contemporary demanded a radical new approach that, in each instance, respected place. For Kahn this would be an architecture without strict referent – and he would use precedents unlocked from architectural time by deploying them in profoundly new and artful ways.

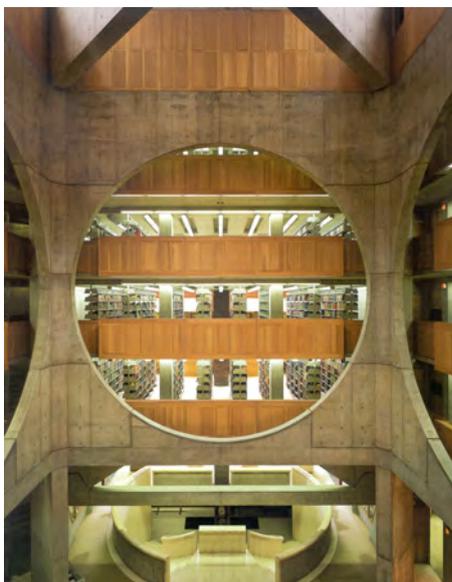
Modern architecture often found itself lost in abstraction. Kahn too was attracted to the abstract but in a way which mingled it with disappearance – the disappearance of the modern into a newer form but not in any Modernist sense of a uni-directional progression. As such, Kahn's architecture engages with, and attempts to control, appearance and disappearance by propelling us simultaneously backward and forward as in his *Sher-e Bangla Nagar*. What his buildings most place in doubt is Modernism's all too perfect image of itself. The moment that modernists say “you cannot do that” they have exposed Modernism's greatest limitation – its uni-directionality.

V. Beautiful Contradictions

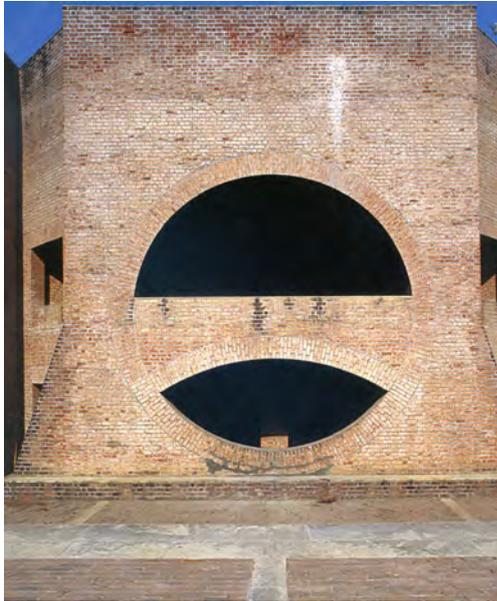
Over the past two centuries one of the greatest challenges posed by thought has involved what to do with dialectics and contradiction. Kahn possessed a rare appreciation for contradiction and like other important thinkers of recent times was not distracted by the simplicity of dialectics or syntheses. Contradiction was key to his radical reversal of the modern view of progress as unidirectional and it appears in many of his buildings. As we approach a building like the Exeter Library we meet an exterior that is reminiscent of a ruin as our eyes travel upwards.



There is nothing about an exterior like the Philips Exeter Academy Library which prepares us for what we will meet inside. The exterior and interior exist as simultaneously contrary yet supportive hypotheses without any need for a synthesis which would destroy the distinctiveness of each. The necessity of the contradiction is encouraged and it allows the experience of this building to astound us both outside (above) and inside:



Such an appreciation for contradiction appears repeatedly in many of his unbuilt plans [8]; and it approaches perfection at his *Indian Institute of Management* in Ahmedabad:



and its apotheosis at Sher-e Bangla Nagar. As in his reversed arches in the *Indian Institute of Management* (protection against earth quakes), his designs drew on architectural extant since at least Leonardo's time in the West which themselves drew on ancient Roman ideas.

We could mistakenly see Kahn as a typical modernist if we were to view his exteriors as resulting from a belief that form should follow function. To the contrary, for Kahn, exterior form, ever respectful of place, follows history while also regarding interior form which he believed began with the room as one space of human activity in communication with the other rooms. The practical function of the circular paired arches at the *Indian Institute of Management* (above), is secondary to the way they participate in wrapping ruins around the building to allow hot sunlight to cool as it reflects and resonates within the building. As such he was interested more in the psychological experience of space than in any banal functionalism.



For Kahn, form compliments and enlivens whatever social function may be performed in the space. This became one more aspect of his resistance to Modernism [9]. While his external aesthetics are no accidents – there is a certain air of apparent serendipity about them as well.



I think this is something that is integral to Kahn's concern for both natural light and what the space wants to be – the first occupants of the architect's intervention into the void. Great architects all possess something of the clairvoyant – a keen perception of how light will fall into the finished structure even when it is only an idea formed into an initial rough sketch (as in the First Unitarian Church and School in Rochester, New York [exterior (above) and interior (down; note how the “light shafts” of the exterior function in the interior)]).

VI. Futures Past

There is also a suggestion of futurism in this historian-architect as his work employs the present medium for that which has been to communicate with what is yet to come. This lent to Kahn an understanding that architecture also involves the sculpture of time and mental space beyond mere function into a contemporary art form – for him utilitarianism was death. The common areas from his *Erdman Hall Dormitory* (down) express his concern for the role of timelessness as art in the sculpting of our mental space.



The contradiction in the physicality of his buildings runs parallel to a deeper appreciation in Kahn for architecture's moving forward by way of the past – not by turning one's back on its lessons as the International Style proposed.

Temporal asymmetry is among the most profound architectural incongruities because in architecture, as Kahn showed us, there is no uni-directional arrow of time. His architecture, which is steeped in a sensitivity to history, participates in the everlasting motion of the monumental free of the limits of the kind of architectural cynicism that has so devastated New York – the city that more than any other forebodes the end of the human world. In the West, modernism was a movement, as Eric Owen Moss aptly describes it: “from defense to offence” [10]. Some of the oldest and most reliable knowledges of the East (which are considered non-knowledges throughout most of Western modernity), remind us that defense is the more powerful position with which to wrestle with the forces of your opponent. Modernity, Kahn was well aware, in its shift to offence, was off balance. For Kahn the task was not to simply be modern, but to pass through Modernism – and this passage takes place in more than one direction. We pass through all disciplines and all times [this is a telling image of Kahn carefully 'reading' an ancient masonry wall in Nepal].



VII. Writing The Poetry of Light and Shadow

Kahn approached his objects as shared spaces of habitation where light was both friend and foe. In the Kimbell Museum Kahn shows himself to be a master of light by



the end of his career, finding as he did (through a narrow slit in the roof), a way to make natural reflected light take on the luminosity of silver. It does this without ever falling directly on any object in the room. Here, the needs of the art of others successfully challenged Kahn to raise the level of his own. The ancient secret which he understood was to put the walls to work bouncing light off of them into the layered spaces we occupy. While merging with the sea to make an incredible work of land art, Kahn's central plaza at his *Salk Institute* also reflects sunlight (its heat removed), into the offices on either side. It is understandable why this building is considered by so many to be Kahn's best.



The *Salk Institute* is highly efficient, ancient in origin, profoundly contemporary, and aesthetically among the more poignant works a human has ever made. Imagine what would have been lost to art if Kahn had planted trees (he gave the idea consideration), in the space occupied by the open plaza.

What worked brilliantly inside the Kimbell worked even more powerfully at the Salk Institute – a highly attenuated sensitivity to light. This growing knowledge of light found magnificent expression in his great buildings in India and Bangladesh. The

hallmark of his later architecture is the poetic reflection of (cooled) sunlight in spaces of strong protective shadow (as in his Indian Institute of Management).



VIII. An Enduring Ecstasy of Eternal Becoming

“Monumentality in architecture conveys the feeling of its eternity” [11].

Monumentality for Kahn involved the enigmatic, the eternal, and the timeless – it could not be the goal of architectural thinking, but more the outcome of architecture’s use. Kahn was unwilling to proceed in a manner which refused to learn from the monuments of the past – especially their lessons about light and shade. Natural shade is a dual medium for an architect with a sense of history – it concerns reflected (cooled) light and it involves air flow and natural cooling. Monumentalism is something of which all great buildings partake and Kahn appears years ahead of his time in terms of devising sustainable monumentality in architecture. Sustainability itself is an ancient idea and many of its secrets are recorded in architecture – the kind of which Kahn knew how to read.

The passage of time is marked by the passage of light over the surface of objects. Objects have, as Jean Baudrillard understood so well, a share in how we understand them (2006:101). In Kahn’s words: “From what the space wants to be the unfamiliar may be revealed to the architect” [12] In the case of his synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, he said: “It is what the space wants to be. A place to assemble under a tree” [13] (*Ibid.*:62). Sometimes, as in the ceiling of his Yale University Art Centre (down), you have to look to the ceiling to know the floor upon which you stand. “Civilization”, Kahn once said, “is measured by the shape of your ceiling” [14] (in McCarter, 2005:133).



He was an architect who understood himself to be a vehicle to allow structure to reveal itself in a way that we might see how the space we inhabit is made and supported. He not only rejected the International Style but supplanted it by using the very ancient forms it eschewed. None of Kahn's buildings shown here can be called modern – they like their maker, came after Modernism, after progress – and before it. These works will never look dated for they embody timelessness – and in their own kind of futurism, an enduring ecstasy of eternal becoming.

IX. Conclusion

Kahn's buildings participate in precisely the kind of timelessness that command memory. If, in the future, architecture does change the world, it may do so in the opposite direction from what we might now hope (*Ibid.*:53). The void is timeless – it extends far into the future. Kahn's understanding of this allowed him to respond to its silent challenge with marvelous works of light and shadow – the most radical architecture of all – allowing the singular space to speak to what it wants to be, given what architecture has been, and may continue to be. Among his most central precepts was that “everything must begin with poetry... an offering” (Kahn, 1971:34). He practiced this profound insight with sufficient enthusiasm to convince architecture to be more than Modern – to be timeless. His work succeeds, and lives on as a series of lessons, on how to build big with an eye to sustainability and the social uses of space in and around buildings.

Dr. Gerry Coulter is Full Professor of Sociology specializing in visual culture and theory. He is founding editor of the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies. He is the author of two recent books: *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert – the Poetics of Radicality* (2012) and *Art After the Avant-Garde* (2014) both with Intertheory Press, USA). He has won Bishop's University's highest award for teaching – the William and Nancy Turner Prize. This paper is dedicated to Nathaniel Kahn, Robert McCarter, B. V. Doshi, and Shamsul Wares. The author expresses his sincere gratitude to Dr. Mary Ellen Donnan for her insightful suggestions during the writing of this paper and to Dr. Celestino Suddo for including in the Generative Art Conference (Venice, Italy) 2015.

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