

Kahn: Architecture and Consciousness

THOUGHTS

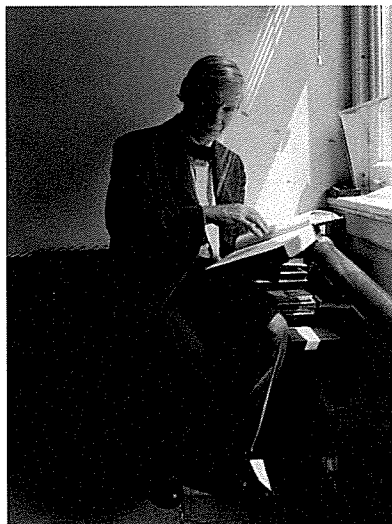
ALTHOUGH I AM AN ARCHITECT, I have great difficulty understanding why the spectrum of issues within an architect's concern is so narrow. Such narrowness has produced devastating results in terms of not only aesthetics but economics (usually the main excuse for this kind of reductionism), social relationships, and the civic realm. It has caused the profession of architecture to sink in social respectability and self-esteem. Consciously or unconsciously, architectural orthodoxy promotes thinking that reduces human life only to that which is measurable, tangible, and immediately available to the senses.

I would like to explore architecture as a means of awakening to a transcendental dimension of life, an expression of the ultimate reality that connects us to the source of being. This statement presupposes an intangible, eternal principle beyond physical reality, with which one must be connected to be truly alive and to feel the deep mystery of life. I believe that contemplating the existence of this principle and invoking it in life is the central theme of all mythology and the essence of every religion.

Kahn's is an architecture of a diminished ego. His work calls attention not to itself, but to the 'unmeasurable' it tries to reflect.

Based on my experience of the powers of space realized in both manmade and natural spatial settings, I believe it is possible to create architecture of such tremendous power as to pitch us out of ordinary reality. Space as well as sound seems to have some direct connection with the way we are made; it can touch us in ways much broader and deeper than is possible through intellect alone. Architects throughout the ages have striven to incarnate, and their best examples exhibit, this kind of powerful spatial invocation.

In our own century, we had a rare human being, an architect, whose life was a search for transcendent architectural principles: Louis I. Kahn. He died only 16 years ago but, as was the case with Thomas More or Mahatma Gandhi, his death has allowed the resonance



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of his message, at least for the time being, to grow weaker and weaker.

A couple of years ago, in fact, Peter Davey, editor-in-chief of *Architectural Review*, in a lecture at UT Austin about the future directions for architecture, did not even mention Kahn. It was his assessment that critical regionalism was architecture's most viable path.

This episode is interesting because of what it suggests. First, Davey may not have understood the real meaning of Louis Kahn's deep penetrations into the nature of existence. Second, in spite of the merit of Kahn's achievements, a sober (or cynical) view of human consciousness in the world today may leave one unwilling to believe there is readiness to pursue this path for architecture. Third, this idealistic pursuit may not be deemed appropriate by society for a "rational and respectable" professional dealing with the tangibles of practice in a capitalist economy.

In any case, Kahn's work is difficult to understand. It exists in a culture still motivated by material gain (though ever slowly waking up to the eco-humanistic realities) and in a profession in search of its identity again and in the midst of great confusion.

One of Kahn's fundamental contributions was to show that the work of an architect is really not about architecture; it is about life. It is about penetrating into the depths of the activities for which we build, discovering their fundamental spiritual nature. In the Exeter Academy Library, for instance, there is an overwhelming reinforcement of the notion of learning, of the great tradition of the West in the preservation and accumulation of knowledge. Perhaps the most poetic moment of this project is realized in a simple yet profound stroke of connection between reader, book, and a beam of light, embodied

quietly in the study carrels surrounding one of the most powerful cries for knowledge I have ever experienced. Precisely through such subtle discovery do we become aware of the fundamental nature of our world. We also realize that spirituality is not rare and isolated, but imminent in everything around us, waiting to be discovered.

To take another familiar example, by giving every room at the Kimbell its own sky, Kahn expressed the fundamental nature of light as the source of life on the planet, its necessity for the visual experience, and the connection between natural light and the making and viewing of works of art. Again, an aspect of the physical world is elevated to a spiritual experience by a penetrating and ingenious invocation in space.

Kahn's is an architecture of a diminished ego. By ego I mean a conceptual structure of thoughts, beliefs, and ideas primarily from the intellect, with which most of us identify. Understanding that the ego is only one aspect of our being is a fundamental metaphysical realization that marks the beginning of individuation, the integration of the elements of our being into a whole person, and the acknowledgement of other ways of knowing beyond the intellect that are inherent in our being.

Kahn's buildings call attention not to themselves but to what he called the 'unmeasurable' reality they try to reflect. Kahn seeks not aesthetic beauty but a revelation of the nature of things, of the order of the universe. By revealing the nature of brick, which wants to be an arch, or by unveiling the relationship between mass and force in a cycloid vault, he reflects the order of the universe. As with a bird singing or a spider weaving its web, the beauty of the song or the intricacy of the web reflect the nature of the bird or the spider, not a conscious action on their part to create an aesthetic object.

For this very reason Kahn's buildings are not always beautiful in a purely aesthetic sense. They are vehicles of the source of being that Kahn calls silence. They acquire existential value, and in so doing become real because they participate in a transcendent reality that is beyond history; it is what Kahn calls volume zero of human existence. By invoking volume zero he dismisses profane, continuous time and, not unlike the people of archaic societies, attempts what Mircea Eliade calls the "return to the mythical time of the beginning of



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Facing page: Louis I. Kahn (from *What Will Be Has Always Been*, 1986, Access Press, Rizzoli)

Left: Sher-e-Banglanagar Ayub National Hospital, Dacca, Bangladesh (from *A+U*, Nov. 1983 issue)

things." The lure of this return, once realized, can be a powerful force in determining motivations and priorities in our everyday life.

There is another fundamental meaning of diminished ego. Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung once said: "Religion is a defense against a religious experience." The moment we reduce the mystery of life to intellectual concepts alone, we begin to short-circuit the spiritual experience and to substitute thoughts about feelings for feelings themselves. We find ourselves always "one thought away from where the action is." By the diminishment of the ego, on the other hand, we create room for the expansion of consciousness beyond thought and time and allow for participation in the world through a heightened awareness.

It would not be totally inappropriate to suggest by deduction that intellectual quasi-theories of architecture (such as deconstruction or postmodernism) preclude the experience of the mythological space. They offer what has been called "the sublimation of a desire for direct experience through the provision of information." In that way they attempt to achieve a preconceived level of gratification in behavioral terms and have a strong affinity for the rhetorical techniques and imagery of advertising.

Mythological space instead is a space of wonder. It is a place of primordial images, beyond and before history. It connects to the fundamental determinants of human existence invoked by the power of symbols and archetypes that reflect the nature and structure of the human psyche, acting as the exponents of the unconscious. As such they also have the power of addressing deeper layers of the human psyche.

Archetypes compose a psychological system of inseparable elements that possess universal meaning for all hu-

mankind. They describe not facts but the way the human psyche experiences facts. Archetypes are the way of transcribing the realm of the collective unconscious into consciousness. In Kahn's terminology *archetype* is identical to *Form*; it does not have shape or size, only character and spirit. Take one element out and the entire form falls apart.

One of the most common and most powerful symbols of man is the circle. It suggests a completed totality, beginning and end in both space and time, one and oneness, tomb and womb; it is a reflection of the psyche, or the Platonic soul. In Kahn's work the circle is always presented as a means to invoke the universal and unmeasurable. The square, on the other hand, symbolizes the circumstantial and measurable. Through the interplay of these two primary symbols Kahn renders visible our struggle: a limited awareness attempting to get in touch with the source of itself.

I believe it is possible to initiate or facilitate an awakening to one's own spiritual and depth potentials by modulating spatial means to invoke a mythological experience through architecture. It is architecture created not for aesthetics but for an experience of wonder and mystery of the world. Fundamental to its creation is not design or drafting skills but the architect's realization of this dimension of life. Coupled with exceptional expressive talent it eventually finds its way to radiance. To me, this awakening is the most important quality of the creative process in any art.

The architecture of awakening rewards individual transformation by redefining the boundary of our discipline and our participation in the world. In such a culture, the experience of the sublime and the concern about world hunger come from the same place. Finding the way to that place in ourselves by experiencing mythological spaces is what the architecture of Louis Kahn is really about. To me it represents the noblest pursuit in architecture and urban design.

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July/August

Correctional Facilities

From the courthouse to the jail house, the effort to deal with crime and criminals has become one of the state's most pressing needs over the last decade. In this issue we will explore some of the innovative, cost-effective responses devised by Texas architects to accommodate the population of Texas prisons.

New Correctional Facilities

Construction over the past decade has focused on increasing prisoner capacities to meet judicial mandates that call for more humane conditions. We will survey exemplary recent work and also consider the courts and administrative buildings that have also been added, becoming in some cases new civic landmarks.

Detention Centers

No correctional building type requires more care than the juvenile detention center. Three centers that successfully address their challenging programs have just been completed.

Border Stations

The federal government, in building a string of fortified waystations on the Rio Grande, is redefining the architecture of the gatekeeper.

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Architecture for Entertainment

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ARCHITECTURE INTERIORS PLANNING DESIGN