

GREY STONE AND GOLDEN DUST

ONE

A dozen projects by the architect, Louis Kahn, built during the quarter century between 1950 and 1975, still carry an uncommon presence and convey an unusual meaning. In considering Kahn, the accepted academic, theoretical and professional notions don't go far enough. Many people, who have tried to evaluate Kahn's quiet magic, have been burdened by preconceptions about which basis of understanding is really important. Confronted with a chimera-like aspect of his career, comprehension often gives way to a myriad of colorful quotations, shining aphorisms pronounced by the charismatic and confident master. Kahn's notes, letters, sketches and off-hand comments may provide clues but few answers. On another level, the practical conventions of familiarity, formality and connoisseurship all fall short. The well conditioned train of thought goes no further. To reach a more adequate appreciation, it might be necessary to let go of expected practices, as if to walk the rest of the distance alone. Maybe other, less frequently used resources are needed, to the extent the desire to know more remains compelling.

Perhaps another, authentic approach can begin with the instinct for perceiving a particular subtle essence. It is as if a noticeable tension can be discerned in the free zone along either side of an invisible line. On one side individual choice can play. On the other side social demands grow to be important. This emotionally charged, psychologically defined territory well describes where and how Louis Kahn chose to work. Whenever decisions could be made among a variety of possibilities, only those particular efforts helping to extend Kahn's spirited approach would actually become realized. His capacity, to cover every concern, changed substantially and improved over time. His ability, to demonstrate consistent control over multiple, conflicting factors of a project, was constantly influenced by fresh, new, sometimes whimsical, considerations in-process.

Admitting this, tracing Kahn's intentions becomes a tricky proposition. He performed a tough act to follow. The choice whether or not to venture onto such a fleeting path should be made deliberately.

TWO

It has not been too rare to hear an opinion that Louis Kahn had no coherent technique at all. No stylistic trademarks are automatically recognizable from one project to another. In experiencing Kahn's buildings directly, however, what may emerge is a simple, clearly detectable presence of intimacy. Where this sentiment is successfully achieved, the forms and fittings also happen to coincide happily enough. The resulting feeling is profound.



Trenton

Setting aside uncritical admiration, suspending a tendency to justify belief through faith, and relying just on pure impression, it is hard to suppose Louis Kahn's elemental Trenton Bath House of 1955 is meaningful architecture. With respect to what has been written about Kahn's career, the plain and simple is sometimes put in the service of what is large and complicated. Through an uncompromising determination to discover the basic fundamentals of his art and craft, Kahn composed a one-story construction, made with concrete block walls and wooden pyramidal roofs. There is no extensive engineering. Heating and cooling aren't important. Obvious effort was given to thinking about proportion and symmetry. An open center at the peak of each roof is memorable. But the client for the project, a committee of directors responsible for making decisions about their agency, was not convinced about the suitability of such a crude shed.

The commission to complete an adjacent, larger community center was given to a different, more conventional architect, instead of Kahn.

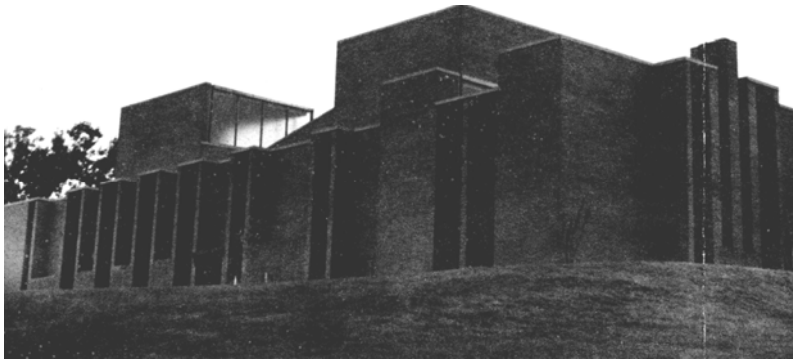
THREE



Richards

Louis Kahn persisted, adjusting his course. By the year 1958, he was ready to extend his personal vision of integrity further, beyond basic material presence, toward honest exposure of technical elements. Structural systems and mechanical services began to dominate his method. Every building component might be expected to demonstrate intrinsic purpose, as well as a clearly articulated place in relation to the whole scheme. If this reasoning dominated in the planning for the Richards Medical Research Tower, on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, then other, more humane purposes remained ill-defined. Real people with difficult and changing requirements would have to play a charade within an idealized, overly restricted, stage-like setting. If Kahn's attempt was praiseworthy, the product of his intellectual adventure proved to be too cumbersome. The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania permitted Kahn to design a Biology Research Tower connected to the original medical tower. But the layout of the subsequent building was modified. Earlier excesses were substantially curtailed.

FOUR



Rochester

The next major project was resolved more politely. Features which had irritated and annoyed previously became addressed with a better discipline. At the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, the architect's desire to join method and purpose finally succeeded. Classrooms completely encircle a large meeting hall. The ceiling of the large, square central room is composed of a concrete cruciform shape, with small square skylights placed within the four cut-out corners. The effect may seem exaggerated and awkward to a degree.

But, in this specific circumstance, for a chapel room, the expression is appropriate. Kahn managed to condition, not abandon, his first intention. Here, an idealistic impulse is fully recognized and authorized.

The glow of an insight, into what might be absolute, universal inspiration, could persist silently along the edge of ordinary perception. This realm may be the source for a fragile dust around which Louis Kahn allowed his ideas to crystallize. At times, it becomes golden dust, when personal knowing somehow resonates comprehensively with larger humanity. Moving to apply his formulation in other situations, beyond a duly religious setting, would lead Kahn to the next question. If reverence is meaningful inside the sanctuary, how does ritual work elsewhere? Reverence, in this context, might be understood as a private receptivity to a greater impulse. It is ultimately an individual, aware response to a presence of intimacy. Maintaining his own strident standards, while carrying his scope of inquiry further, would lead Louis Kahn to explore poetic notions of symbol and suggestion, beyond more literal statement of things as they are definitely known to be.

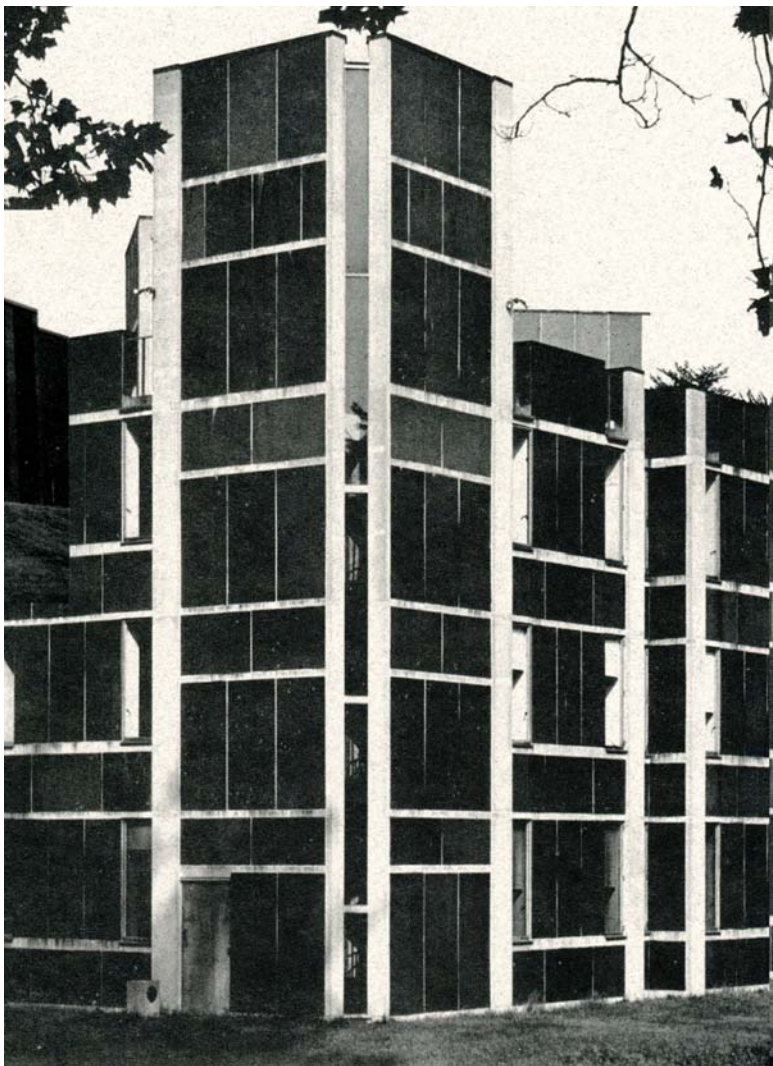
FIVE

Kahn's first idea for the Salk Institute, dated about 1960, methodically established structural and mechanical requirements. The working laboratory building was imagined to be one part of a larger community of interests. Also, housing and administration would be arranged in elaborate sculptural clusters.

As the influence of Dr. Salk was impressed on this scheme, such a highly articulated, literal approach was abandoned in favor of a philosophically different version. Simple abstract representations replaced the original intricate assemblage. After all, Dr. Salk's reputation had been established on certain principles. He had discovered and promoted a successful dead-virus vaccine for Polio, actually demonstrating that the human body can respond appropriately to an indication of stimuli, as well as to a living virus.

Furthermore, Dr. Salk had gone beyond the normal codes of behavior of a small cadre of scientific research specialists. He had made his contribution emotionally welcome to a broad public.

So Kahn's interpretation came to answer to another, possibly more effective selection of priorities. The proposed housing units became incorporated within the building complex as private studies, and the meeting areas became transformed as an open plaza, while the structural and mechanical components became hidden inside massive closed blocks.



Bryn Mawr

A similar process of philosophical distillation also governed Kahn's thinking elsewhere, in the women's Erdman Hall dormitory built at Bryn Mawr College, near Philadelphia. The architect continued to distinguish the needs for privacy and community within a socially contained, exclusive setting.

SIX

Louis Kahn's attention was drawn abroad to India and Bangladesh about 1965. Virtually everything seems contradictory, comparing his Asian experience with what he had accomplished previously. If technical considerations had been predominant in Kahn's earlier projects, then in his Asian efforts these factors are practically suppressed but poetically exaggerated through use of bold elemental geometries. Compressive and tensile internal material pressures became celebrated through the use of massive brick walls pierced with taut concrete tendons. Sculptural volumes artfully provide natural light, shade and ventilation, showing sensibility with regard to an area of the world where highly sophisticated solutions are unreasonably expensive, and maintenance of equipment is unreliable. The huge parliamentary Assembly Building in Dacca displays dramatically impressive external shells enclosing quiet, internal core spaces. However, when actual errors in calculations for the foundation were discovered, it became difficult to create a light-weight roof for the vast main hall. During the civil war between East and West Pakistan, the unfinished project remained open to the sky. In spite of these unexpected problems, Louis Kahn insisted upon traditional materials and manual workmanship as much as possible. In view of intentions, some measure of the best interest of all could endure through great adversity and turmoil. Eventually, a delicately folded, thin shell of concrete covered the great space.

SEVEN

The broad scope of Louis Kahn's mature design method is well illustrated by his advanced, modern factory built for the Olivetti

Company near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, about 1968. The seemingly timeless work in Asia was accomplished during the same period. The stylized forest of concrete trees, which Kahn invented for Olivetti, shows structure deliberately, while also integrating pragmatic necessity.

EIGHT



Exeter

There is general agreement that the Exeter Academy Library, in Exeter, New Hampshire, and the Kimbell Art Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas, show Louis Kahn's skill to the greatest degree. Elements which could be unsure in other places become intelligently balanced in Kahn's last works. A deep impression of patience, an exceptional respect for the quality of time, endures within and around these places.

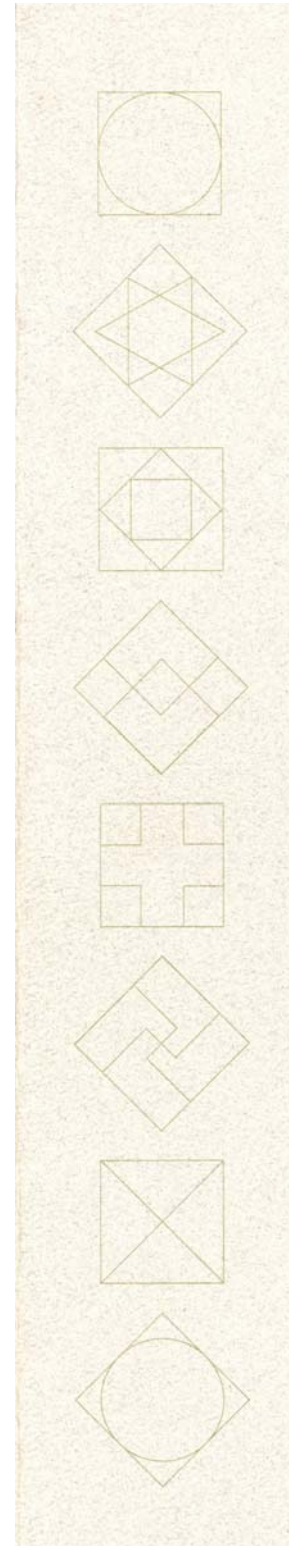
A search for essential meaning informed Louis Kahn's architecture.

Looking back, in retrospect from a vantage point based on unmeasurable, but enduring values, his buildings display the workings of highly systematic drive. His efforts show purpose, using appropriate building practices. His selected form for any project profoundly authorizes an understanding of the activity to be accommodated there. Kahn's overall method moved through distinct stages; starting at an emphasis on physical appearance, progressing through structural and technical integrity and, later, reaching an awareness of social, political and institutional influences. In the end, he achieved a means for including together many potentially contradictory considerations. Traces of his progress can be viewed throughout his work. If each step of the way demonstrates some part of his realization, then it is unnecessary for others to repeat the same process in the same manner. An essential personal recognition can be brought to a wider awareness more easily. That is what progress, evolution and cultural advancement are all about.

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"A Comment about Louis Kahn: Grey Stone and Golden Dust"

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Emblems inspired by Louis Sullivan :

"A System of Architectural Ornament
in Accord with a Philosophy
of Man's Powers" Chicago 1924