カーンのエシュリック邸とフィッシャー邸 ——— ピーター・S・リード

Louis I. Kahn's Esherick and Fisher Houses *by Peter S. Reed*

The architecture of Louis I. Kahn is synonymous with monumental civic buildings, cultural institutions, and places of worship. His buildings possess rigorous order; they are abstract formal compositions of solid and void imbued with ineffable qualities of light. Many of his celebrated talks describe these "institutions of man" and the symbolic power underlying his architecture—an architecture principally concerned with the making of public places. But on a number of occasions, Kahn also claimed that an architect could design a house and a city "in the same breath" if both are considered as "being a marvelous, inspired, expressive realm."[1] From early in his career, Kahn, the architect/planner, designed houses that often shared a common hierarchical order with his larger works, regardless of size, whether a room, building, or city.

With the exception of the dormitories at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad and residential enclaves at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, the capital complex at Dhaka, all of Kahn's houses are located in the Philadelphia area. They are mostly modest commissions from early in his career. However, the Esherick and Fisher Houses, completed in 1962 and 1967 respectively, are among the masterpieces of his later, mature work when he was preoccupied with more substantial commissions in other parts of the world. Both houses are brilliant demonstrations of Kahn's architectural philosophy and offer insights into his ideas of universal order and particular place. Yet the designs reveal different compositional strategies in the disposition of geometric hierarchy and the relationship of part to whole. While each is a meditation on the universality of abstract form tempered by human needs and the demands of site, there is a significant difference between them. The Esherick House is a cerebral study of the rectangle. The divisions and subdivisions of its principal parts are realized with a rigor that never loses sight of the overall geometric unity. Indeed, Kahn once remarked that in an orthogonal scheme "everything is...answerable to a square."[2] In the Fisher House Kahn violated that unity by the bold physical separation of the house into two discrete cubes juxtaposed at a forty-five degree angle. This extraordinary, even irrational gesture results in a composition of oblique angles that is spatially complex and architecturally more dynamic than the earlier house. Yet both designs are predicated on the study of ideal form. As objects in a landscape they recall the man-made perfection of a classical villa in its pastoral setting; as pure geometry they are quintessentially modern.

The Margaret Esherick House is located in Chestnut Hill, a picturesque residential community developed in the nineteenth century known for its natural beauty and historic stone and brick houses. Though a part of Philadelphia, Chestnut Hill is essentially suburban in character—a refuge from the city center. Situated on a quiet lane in an enclave of modest modern houses (the contemporary Vanna Venturi House is nearby) the Esherick House overlooks Pastorius Park. Designed for Margaret Esherick, a bibliophile and younger sister of distinguished San Francisco-based architect Joseph Esherick, the two-story house is intimate, reflecting the needs of a single person. The plan is straightforward: living room with ample bookshelves, dining room, kitchen, bedroom, and bath. Within these parameters, Kahn established the main theme of the house: the division of rectilinear parts while maintaining a reading of the whole. The strategy is evident in plan, section, and elevation, displaying a sophisticated handling of solid and void, public and private, in a geometrically rigorous composition.

Indeed, the first-floor plan appears deceptively simple. An A-B-A-B rhythm is created by the living room, stairs, dining room, kitchen—a clear arrangement of Kahn's "served and servant spaces." The central stair, dividing the principal parts of the house, recalls the archetypical center hall and parlor plan of American domestic architecture, and indeed of many Chestnut Hill residences.

The Esherick House is a two-story rectangular volume: a concrete masonry structure with infill of stained wood and glass. Buff-colored stucco conceals the masonry units, creating a seamless finish that gives the volume its monolithic appearance. Each facade is treated individually, although front and back share a principal Kahnian architectural theme: monumentality. The composition of windows and shutters—both small and large scale elements—combine to unite the two-story volume of the modest house in a monumental composition indicative of Kahn's intuitive sense of scale and proportion. At the street facade, the central doorway and second-story balcony are set in deep vertical reveals (reflective of the central stair beyond) bifurcating the facade into two nearly equal parts, balanced but not symmetrical. To the right is the double-height living room, whose elongated T-shaped window allows clerestory light while maintaining privacy. To the left is a more complex variation of the two-story T-shaped window illuminating the foyer below and bedroom above. This monumental composition, scaled to the double-storied facade, is then subdivided into single-story parts scaled to the particular room. The bedroom window is itself a smaller T-shaped form of fixed plate glass and small wood-panelled sheltered alcove below. It is flanked by deep-set shutters that can be opened for light and air even in the rain. In a sense they form miniature verandas protecting the interior from the elements. The manipulation of natural light by means of architectural elements had been hallmarks of Kahn's buildings and projects since the 1940s, and were a life-long concern. The deep shuttered reveals and entrance alcove of the Esherick House add texture and richness to an otherwise flat facade. Light and shadow play across the smooth stucco

surface in an extraordinary artistic composition, a manifestation of Kahn's belief in the symbolic importance of light and shadow as fundamental architectural elements. Moreover, these penetrations of shadow convey an exaggerated mural thickness contributing to a monumental and solid presence typical of Kahn's institutional work.

A similar composition of solid and void, the small and the monumental, appears on the other principal facade overlooking the lush grounds of the neighboring park. The same vertical bifurcation of the facade into two main volumes by deep vertical reveals at the rear doorway and balcony occurs along the central axis. Here, where there is less need for privacy, the idiosyncratic T-windows are replaced by a large expanses of glass open to long views of the park. The double-height of the living room, the principal room in the house, is fully apparent. Flanking the large fixed plate glass windows, wooden shuttered reveals rise from ground to roof, a sort of giant order, giving the facade even greater transparency when opened. As at the street, they are transformational elements, modulating light, ventilation, and privacy. The volume with dining room below and bedroom above also opens more to the park, although the bedroom's T-shaped window subdivides to the human-scale of the individual room.

The side facades are clearly secondary, but with similar contrasts of architectural elements and scale. The cross axis of the living room wall is marked by the central fireplace and disengaged chimney. A tall narrow window rises in an almost playful and revelatory fashion above the fireplace, a compositional echo of the sliver window at the front facade subdividing the wall of wooden bookcases. Through the high window only the chimney is visible, the one element pulled away from the overall rectangular composition of the house. As with the tall shafts of the contemporary Richards Medical Research Building's service towers, Kahn articulates the chimney's particular function. But here the chimney serves a domestic purpose, symbolic of hearth and home while tracking the sun across the southern sky like a sun dial. The fourth facade of the house, the service entrance, is punctuated by windows to the kitchen and bathroom in a marvelous abstract and circumstantial composition of varying rectangular shapes located where needed. Perhaps because of the basically utilitarian functions within, this facade eschews the monumentality and obvious hierarchy of the other three.

To maximize the airiness and overall simplicity of the house, the interiors of uncluttered white walls set off the warm natural color of the distinctive woodwork: the tall bookshelves, window shutters, staircase, and cabinetry. The kitchen cabinets and counter tops, however, are unique. They were designed and superbly crafted by the client's uncle, Wharton Esherick, a sculptor renowned for his woodwork and for whom Kahn had designed a studio addition in the 1950s. Their gently curving and natural shapes form a lyrical counterpoint to Kahn's strict orthogonal geometries and underscores the difference between an organic, expressive mode and Kahn's classical training.

The spareness of the interiors permits a clear reading of the composition. Openness between rooms is maintained, and doorways are minimal, yet the geometries are clearly described. The wooden staircase commands the center of the house. At the top, a balcony overlooks the spacious living room, supported by a single timber beam demarcating the first and second floors. The second floor bedroom spans the width of the house and parallels the living room.

The division of the Esherick House into two principal volumes without sacrificing the rectangle's overall unity is a masterful, balanced composition indicative of a deeply rational logic. In the house designed for Norman and Doris Fisher in 1964, Kahn revealed a different compositional strategy to a more dramatic effect: the sacrifice of axial order by the separation and rotation of two principal volumes. The relative calm of the Esherick House gives way to a greater tension between the juxtaposed cubes of the Fisher House. The strong diagonal introduced by the forty-five-degree angle creates a dynamic composition. From every point of view, the view is always oblique; the relationship of one to the other, a dialectic. Linking one volume to the corner of another, which Kahn described as an "architecture of connection," was a significant breakthrough in his architecture. Just prior to designing the Fisher House, Kahn aligned the three diamonds of Erdman Dormitory at Bryn Mawr College, however axially. At the Assembly Building at Dhaka, he juxtaposed the prayer hall and parliament building at oblique angles. In several later projects after the Fisher House, Kahn adapted this planning device to even greater visual and spatial effects as in The Dominican Mother House project. Kahn's idea of the joint as the beginning of ornament was usually exemplified by his design of smaller structural elements. Here, the concept of the joint as a point of origin includes the *parti* of the house—the nonhierarchical juxtaposition of two pavilions.

Set on a gently sloping site in Hatboro, a suburb of Philadelphia, the Fisher House overlooks a quiet creek and wooded meadow beyond. The house is clad in thin vertical strips of tidewater cypress above a foundation of rough cut local stone, materials Kahn favored for his Philadelphia area houses in a gesture to the region's vernacular architecture. From the street, the house appears to be two wooden cubes two stories tall. The rear facade is a full three stories with the impressive stone basement wall fully exposed. As construction photographs reveal, the stone foundations marking the plan of the house will make a beautiful ruin evocative of the ancient structures Kahn spoke about so

passionately.

The volumetric bifurcation is reflected in the program of the house. One wing contains the bedrooms; the living and dining areas and kitchen occupy the other. As such, it recalls Kahn's much earlier Weiss House with its "binuclear" division between living and sleeping areas but purged of its more orthodox modernist style. The division between public and private and the distinction between small individual and large group spaces are the chief ordering principles in Kahn's institutional projects as well. This hierarchy is reflected spatially in the Fisher House. The living areas are contained in one large double-height space more than sixteen feet high, not unlike the volumetric handling of the Esherick living room. The bedroom wing, yielding to necessity, is divided into discrete rooms on two floors: master bedroom below and children's and guest bedrooms above.

The composition of the elevations is treated as rationally as at the Esherick House. The exterior surfaces, clad in thin vertical strips of cypress, are perforated by small- and large-scale windows. The bedroom wing presents a nearly blind facade to the street for privacy. Ground-to-roof vertical windows of a giant order are set in deep reveals spanning both floors. The sense of monumentality pervades. At the rear, four nearly identical windows with adjacent alcoves arranged symmetrically, scaled to the individual bedrooms and entrance hall. The small operable windows cast light on the bedroom desks. They are set in alcoves just large enough for a child to find a private little hiding spot (as the Fisher's children apparently did). The facades of the living room pavilion are treated on a grander scale with large expanses of glass in an asymmetrical arrangement. By contrast, the basement wall below with its grotto-like openings reinforces the archetypal and primitive quality of the stone foundation.

The entrance to the Fisher House occurs in the angled cube. The experience of the diagonal is immediate. The entry hall runs the length of the cube, and culminates in a spectacular view of the verdant, sloping landscape beyond. The entrance to the living room is at the point of connection between the two cubes—the angle underscored by the change in direction of the wood flooring between the entry hall and living room. The entire cubic volume of the living space is at once comprehensible. Only an eight-foot-high screen around the kitchen and the thrusting stone fireplace divide the room. The massive fireplace rises from the earth-bound foundations through the living room. Its curving wall of craggy rock forms a counterpoint to the hard-edge geometry of the cube so precisely delineated by wood banding and white walls. The rough stone seems appropriate to the country setting, but also suggests a primitive, male presence. Kahn associated the fireplace with maleness, here manifest by a cosmic pillar that forcefully penetrates the living space, a no less powerful gesture than the angled chasm that cleaves the two cubes.[3] Whereas an Apollonian control pervades the Esherick House, the Fisher House seems inspired by more Dionysian forces.

In the corner beside the fireplace, an intricately crafted wooden bench suspended between two alcove windows suggests a modern inglenook. The inset windows flanking the bench, themselves beautifully crafted, are exquisitely human scaled: the taller window for a standing person, the smaller window thoughtfully designed for the seated person reading on the couch. Because the living room is perched a full story above the sloping ground, views through the expansive windows are filled with trees and light, the experience akin to being in a tree house high in the branches.

Late in his life Kahn spoke poetically about architecture, couching his philosophy in simple metaphors. Architecture for Kahn was the "making of a room," a thought expressed with a deep sensitivity to the nature of tectonic space: "The room is the beginning of architecture... The room is the place of the mind. In a small room one does not say what one would in a large room... A room is not a room without natural light. Natural light gives the time of day and the mood of the seasons to enter."[4] These relatively primal rhapsodies on architecture characterize the Esherick and Fisher houses as much as his more ambitious works. That simplicity, however, is achieved by a compelling structural clarity and hierarchical relationship of elements, a masterful integration of light and mass, and a sensitive relationship to the site and humanity.

Notes:

1. Richard Saul Wurman, ed. What Will be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn, New York: Access Press Ltd. and Rizzoli, 1986, p.151.
2. Louis I. Kahn, "Remarks" (lecture, Yale University, October 30, 1963), Perspecta, no. 9/10 (1965), p.324.
3. Kahn's association of a fireplace with a man was recorded in a talk at the International Design Conference, "The Invisible City," in Aspen, Colorado in 1972 and is quoted in Wurman, p.170.
4. The quote is inscribed on a drawing titled "The Room" from 1971 in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.