

0.1 Chapter 6: curriculum: Art/Architecture

0.2 Art/Architecture

1 Louis Kahn

Modern architecture produces truly innovative work: glittering, staggeringly tall buildings, opera houses that look like folded origami, even museums that look like spaceships. However, in turning towards everything new, architectural modernism also dogmatically left behind much of what makes buildings lovely. The best architects of the modern age have managed to avoid this pitfall, discarding older, dull conventions while retaining the meaningful and beautiful aspects of tradition. Perhaps one of the most successful architects at finding this balance was a whimsical, absent-minded American named Louis Kahn.

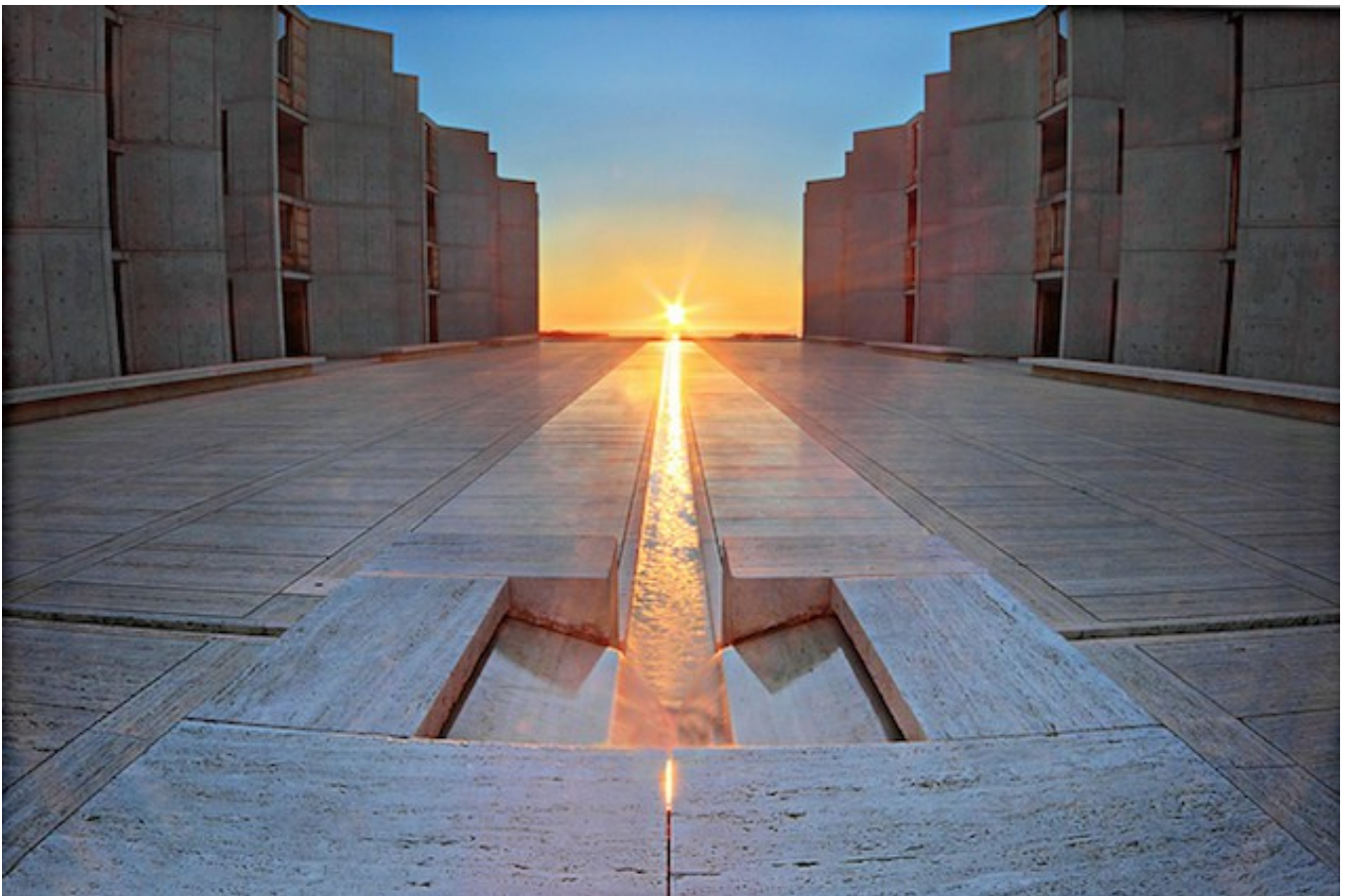
Kahn was born in 1901. As a young man he studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, but his career truly blossomed in the 1950s after a trip to Rome led him to a new appreciation of ancient designs. Kahns important contribution to modern architecture was to include these older and even ancient elements in his work without losing the innovation and clarity of modernism.



1.0.0.0.1 The Salk Institute for Biological Studies, built in 1960

One example of this successful rehabilitation of old ideas was Kahns affection for symmetry, which modern architects usually saw as unimaginative and conformist. Kahn designed the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California as a complex of buildings, identical on either side of a central fountain. Such symmetry was characteristic of the Beaux-Arts style, but Kahn was unperturbed by this apparent regression. If people want to see Beaux-Arts its fine with me, he said. Im [as] interested in good architecture as anybody else.

Kahn used the identical rows of buildings to draw the viewers eye to the centre of his design, and to the sea beyond it. The fountain that runs through the centre of the institute aligns with the path of the sun on both the autumnal and vernal equinox. Thus Kahn used symmetry not as an aesthetic default but instead with great intentionality, to provide one with a sense of balance, focus, and momentum.



1.0.0.0.2 The Institute during the vernal equinox

Kahn also managed to create a sense of grandeur in his designs rarely seen in modern architecture. We might gape at the height of a skyscraper, but it rarely instills the sense of awe that a great cathedral does.



1.0.0.0.3 The Yale Centre for British Art, built in New Haven, Connecticut in 1969

Yet Kahn managed to reintroduce this sense of wonder and magnificence to modern works. In the Yale Centre for British Art, he draws the viewers eyes upward to the high windowed ceiling, much as though it were the dome of a church. The buildings wide column is imposing; even the staircases create a sense of lofty space and height. The effect is that the viewer feels reverence and appreciation not only for the art on display, but for buildings, museums and the idea of culture itself.



Most modern architects have relied mainly on steel, concrete, and glass, but Kahn sought a wide variety of sensory materials. He regularly brought consultants into his office to find new uses for ceramic, copper, and other unusual substances, and once he had his class at Yale think of as many possible uses for clay as they could manage. Most of all, he rejected the idea that architects should always use the most efficient and modern building materials. Instead, he instructed his students to ask the materials for advice: You say to a brick, What do you want, brick? And brick says to you, I like an arch. And you say to brick, Look, I want one, too, but arches are expensive and I can use a concrete lintel. And then you say: What do you think of that, brick? Brick says: I like an arch. In short, the brick should have its way.



1.0.0.0.4 A striking combination of wood and concrete in the Phillips Exeter Academy Library, built in 1965 in Exeter, New Hampshire

Kahn especially liked to cleverly juxtapose unexpected materials like concrete and oak, as he did in his Esherick house, built in 1959. Usually, we associate oak wood with Victorian smoking rooms and dusty, ancient libraries, while concrete reminds us of impersonal factories and remote, futuristic buildings. But together, the two mediums demonstrate strikingly different, yet remarkably complementary virtues. The wood gives the space a warmth and domesticity that makes the house a good place for a bookworm, while the concrete provides a sense of strength and stability that lends it a reassuring feeling of refuge from the outside world. This combination of materials subtly suggests that we can find comfort and strength together.



1.0.0.0.5 Wooden shelves and warm beige concrete in The Escherick House in Philadelphia



Finally, Kahn is remembered as a monumental architect in both senses during a time when most modern architects firmly rejected monuments as useless and sentimental. In 1938 the architectural critic Lewis

Mumford firmly declared, if it is a monument it is not modern; if it is modern it cannot be a monument. But Kahn liked monuments. After his important trip to Rome, he wrote, I finally realize that the architecture of Italy will remain as the inspirational source of the works of the future...those who dont see it that way ought to look again. Our stuff looks tiny compared to it. The marble Kahn used in his Kimbell Arts Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas is, for example, a clear reference to the ancient buildings that Kahn so admired.



1.0.0.0.6 The Kimbell Arts Museum built in 1972

When Kahn died in 1974, he was perhaps the most famous architect in the United States, and he remained deeply influential. Kahns importance lay in his ability to transcend dogmatic modernism and return beautiful traditional elements of architecture to their rightful place in the canon of design, where they could continue to bring gravitas, elegance, and splendour to buildings for future generations.