The Meaning of a Wall: Architecture
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New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 7, 1974; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 140

Architecture

The Meaning of a Wall

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

For Louis Kahn, there were ten years of great buildings, and a lifetime of preparation. Which makes his sudden death harder to take, because it was not a promising talent that was cut off, but one that flowered late, and magnificently, to create works of architecture of such enormous fullness and richness that they stand not only as masterworks of this age, but with the agelessness of great art, for all time.

Some of the best of his work, in Bangladesh and India, was still coming out of the ground; even more of it, for New Haven and Baltimore and other American cities, was still on the drawing board in his Philadelphia office. The Salk Institute at La Jolla, of the nineteen sixties, and the Exeter Library in New Hampshire and Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, of the nineteen seventies, are established landmarks. He had reached this point of achievement slowly and painstakingly, and without much fanfare; it was just quietly accepted that he stood alone in creative stature at this critical phase of 20th-century art.

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The poignancy of his death is made even more tragic by the circumstances. Alone in Pennsylvania Station on a Sunday night, returning from a working trip to India and on his way back to Philadelphia for a Monday morning class, he apparently died quickly. His passport provided identification and the New York police attempted to reach his office, which was closed for the weekend. Inexplicably, they did not call his home, but gave the information to the Philadelphia police, who never notified his family at all. It was Tuesday before inquiries found his body in New York. Such is sudden death in the age of alienation and anonymity; anguish aggravated by an uncaring bureaucracy.

Lou Kahn was in his prime at 73; no other architect approached him. And all other architects, including some very good ones indeed, knew that the work he was doing was the catalytic kind that changes cities and culture, and the way man thinks about himself and his world.

Kahn was not a pioneer, breaking the frontiers of architecture, leading the modern movement into radical territory. He was not one of the initial formgivers, offering revolutionary definition of 20th-century esthetics. He was a fundamentalist, seeking beginnings, and meanings, fond of saying that he consulted not volume one of civilization, but volume zero.

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During the early years of his career he built little, and taught and thought much, developing a personal language that combined poetry and philosophy in tantalizing and elusive intimations of deeply felt universal truths. They were truths that he sought persistently in architecture—the meaning of a wall, or a roof, or a door, the way light brought spirit to a structure, what the building "wanted to be." He pursued basic answers, in the deepest terms of art and humanism.

He tried, in a process of sophisticated purification, to "reinvent" architecture. He looked for something he called, interchangeably, Order, or Form, which he saw as a kind of self-revelatory information about building—if one looked hard enough—that forged functional and social needs and the "will" of materials and structure into a humanistic whole. He probed constantly for this "reality."

It involved intense analysis of what he called "served and servant spaces," both of which he felt deserved equal design consideration and expression. He "asked" materials what they "wished" to do. At Ahmedabad the brick answered, in Kahn's words, "I like an arch." At Exeter, the brick arches "requested" the greater support of concrete. Everywhere, he pursued the "thoughtful making of spaces."

The style he developed with much painstaking se
—if one can use a
ficial word like st
something that now s
elemental—is a fusion
and present. It repres
rare and indescribab
portant moment whe
ernism came to term
history. In the struggle for
this stylistic resolution, his
early buildings were a com-
bination of startling strengths
and unsettling failures. Some-
times they were seriously
flawed. "It is better
the right thing badl
taught his students, "
do a bad thing well."

He worked this wa
of the mainstream, all
For much of it, he wa
He had been brought
adelphia from Russia
child, in 1905. He learn
religion and music at
later he learned Beau
classicism at the Uni
of Pennsylvania Scho
Fine Arts, where he ear
Bachelor of Architecture
gree. Paul Cret was his pro
fessor, and briefly, his
employer. He never lost his
sympathy for Beaux Arts
style and substance.

Still later, convinced
lectually by the moderni
revolution, he worked with
George Howe and Oscar Stonorov. But his attempt
jettison the Beaux Arts tra
dition in favor of radical
structural lightness and thin
planes were never totally
successful. Visits to Europe
reinforced his love of antiq-
uity and medievalism.

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It is not surprising that for
many years Kahn was a puz-
zle to his peers. He had no
definable place on the
wagon of modernism. He
seemed out of step
times. It was this
phenomenon, perhaps,
slowed both his own develop-
ment and general understand-
ing and acceptance of what
he tried to do.

The profession watched his "ugly" buildings grow with fascination; their prolonging experimentation and deliberate roughness caused confusion, interest and debate. Clients were less sure. The critics, and he did so with the

The late Louis Kahn in his Philadelphia office

United Press International

Interpreter of Le Corbusier and the Parthenon

Gallery of 1951-53 broke the deadlock; the building was a successful, much-praised step toward his later manner. The Richards Medical Research Building of 1957-61 at the University of Pennsylvania earned a small, significant personal success at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

But whatever his natural bent, Kahn's fully developed work would not have been possible without the crucible of the modern movement. When he went back to the brick wall and the arch, he joined them to reinforced concrete, and he did so with the new esthetic vision and functionalist philosophy of the International Style. He was, at once, the interpreter of Le Corbusier and the Parthenon.

His buildings, full of strength and grace, have persuasive presence. They belong to their own age, and to all ages, with equal ease. Their almost primitive beauty, deceptively simple and yet extraordinarily sophisticated, is already an unassailable part of the progress of civilization and its arts. Louis Kahn was more than an architect; he was an elemental force.