

BOMB

An Impossible Interview with Louis I. Kahn
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Reading the words of Louis Kahn eighteen years after his death, we find the necessary antidote to the hollow rhetoric of the current situation. This “impossible interview” was compiled by selecting Kahn’s text first. Although the selection was personal and arbitrary, the choices were guided by a need to consider architecture as evidence of the success or failure of man’s institutions. In Kahn’s built work, we are forced to reconsider architecture in terms of a poetic reality that is integral to the material presence of his structures, and through his words, we can approach the source of this powerful magic.



Louis Kahn and his assistants working on Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh c. 1964 George Alikakos.

All Photographs courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, NYC.

Carlos Brillembourg is an architect who practices in New York and Caracas.

How would you describe this epoch?
...we are living in a time when the sun is temporarily suspended from serving man. Somehow even the sun was under suspicion. All our institutions were to be reviewed. Nothing that existed was taken with any reverence. This can be thought to be a catastrophic thing.

And it could have been a catastrophic thing in my mind, if I hadn't thought of this. The white light and the black shadow filled my mind with great possibility.

White light is not in nature.

There is not white light, nor is there black shadow.

I knew the sun was still shining.

I also knew that it wasn't death, nor harmful, but something truly inspiring.

I also knew that the white light would turn yellow, only a brighter yellow; that the black shadow would turn blue, a

brighter blue. Because people will not take things as they are, and in the deepest sense they distrust everything until it filters through the mind as being true. Therefore those who want to write poetry without words.

This is not an age of wonder.

I see no wonder in what's being done, but the apparent lack of reverence is only a sign of the seeking of reverence, something to revere and fight for.

Your architecture falls within a timeless frame. It belongs to the past as much as to the present. Is your architecture concerned with contemporary culture?

An architect must have tremendous power of anticipation.

When he builds a building, he is building it today.

There's no such thing as building a building for the future. It's impossible to anticipate the future, but it is possible to anticipate the lasting quality in what you do today!

That is why buildings that have been done in a certain era last; they simply reverberate. There isn't a time when a great building isn't felt to be a great building. It's a manifestation of what is a miracle in man's realm of expression. Tradition is a kind of golden dust that falls; if you put your fingers through it, there is a crystallization out of all circumstances which brought it about and made it be. If you put your fingers through it, I think you can sense the powers of anticipation, because in what has been accepted before by man as a place to live, a place to be, a place to talk, to learn, there must be considered a

miracle, and nothing short of it. You don't discard it. You don't burn the books. You look at them until you put holes with your eyes through them. They are marvelous examples. And anything that is too close to you now can be or may prove to be only good for only a very few. A singularity is the beautiful facet of all humanity.

What distinguishes the nature of architecture from the nature of painting or sculpture?

Architecture, nevertheless, has limits.

When we touch the invisible walls of limits, then we know more about what is contained by them. A painter can paint square wheels on a cannon to express the futility of war. A sculptor can carve the same square wheels. But an architect must use round wheels. Though painting and sculpture play a beautiful role in the realm of architecture, just as architecture plays a beautiful role in the realms of painting and sculpture, they do not have the same discipline. One may say that architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces. It is not the filling of areas proscribed by a client. It is the creating of spaces that evoke a feeling of appropriate use.

What is unmeasurable is the psychic spirit. The psyche is expressed by feeling, and also by thought, and I believe it will always remain unmeasurable. I sense that the psychic Existence Will calls on Nature to make that which it wants to be. I think a rose wants to be a rose. Man, created by Existence Will, came into being through the laws of Nature and evolution. But the results are always less than the spirit of existence.

In the same way, to accomplish a building you must start in the unmeasurable and go through the measurable. You must follow the laws, but in the end, when the building becomes part of living, it must evoke measurable qualities.

Why do you choose to organize your plans within a symmetrical order?

What do you think about a more casual arrangement?

I wouldn't do what [Hans] Scharoun did, but I appreciate immensely what he tried to do. I could show you early sketches of what I myself had in mind for Venice. It was the same kind of thing, in which you did not hold rigidly to the geometric shape, but felt as though there were separate areas of people rather than a geometrical disc plan.

But you see, my sense is different. I don't see it in a painterly way. I don't see it even as a sculptural thing. If I were to place one group here, one group there, one group here, I would be forcing them more into an

area than I am in placing them in a very general frame, where their minds can make their groups, not the architecture. I don't like it nailed down. If you could move it and change it every day without making a nature out of it, fine. But there's another thing, which constantly pushes me in other directions: I see a building in an anthropomorphic way, as a body. I don't want to be conscious of how my body functions. I always just expect it to be tremendously resourceful. I have need for things which my body can always handle: to run, to jump, to move quickly, to move slowly. I want to take any position, not just certain selective positions. Therefore, my tendency is to make a room without any willfulness, except that which the inspiration of the room itself can offer. The sense of commonality, of human agreement, should be in every plan that is made. Nature will give you anything provided you obey its laws.

Through the laws of nature one senses the rules that man gives. Rules are made to be broken.

When you realize a higher realization than the rules you employed before, it means you have come to a wonderful moment in man's presence.

Law never changes.

Law is nature's way, nature's unconscious way.

There is no chaos in nature. The Greeks said it, a long time ago. Their minds were not cluttered because they had no books. They realized that nature's laws were irrefutable. Nature is only in its play of laws, changing its attitude, changing its position into new and constant play of equilibria. Everything is always in balance, except the next moment is not in the same balance as now.

We think that is chaos, but it isn't chaos. Anything can happen, no matter what is, provided the laws are in play. You are surprised by it and you are troubled by it — that only means that you have to learn more.

Chaos exists in man's mind, but not in nature.

Has LeCorbusier been an important influence in your architecture?

LeCorbusier was a revelation to me. He made me realize that there was a man alive who could be an inspiring teacher. Through his work he could teach you. This was not true of works of old, because they belonged to their era and you could not sense the human decisions, the time that brought it about. That would be a wonderful thing to know, but in no history do you find it. Having a man living and producing that which others are not producing, that which you sense has the quality of giving rise to inspiration — that had greater power than works of old.

I felt I could throw away the books, which was what was in the air at the time Gropius advocated throwing away the books. Somebody asked me, Hasn't the image of LeCorbusier faded in your mind? I said, No, it hasn't faded, but I

I sense that the psychic Existence Will calls on Nature to make that which it wants to be. I think a rose wants to be a rose.

don't turn the pages of his work anymore. I don't turn the pages, though I know that they will be turned again.

At one time, I thought the ideas of towers with big open spaces around them was a wonderful thing, until I realized, Where is the bakery shop? And the park was not good enough.

If you consider that what is has always been, then what is must be looked at as what has gone awry.

It seems that your architecture, at its best, celebrates the simple dignity: working, playing and meditating. What is the role of the architect in a world where the tragic reality of poverty and homelessness captivate you relentlessly?

I hold distinction between desire and need.

We live by reason of desire. Need is just so many bananas. It's disgraceful not to give to the needy. It's the duty of every individual to see that those who are alive are supplied their needs. No duty of government is more important than making duck soup of need. Fulfilling need is an absolute right of anyone in this world.

That country which does not foster that greatness in our feelings of desire is a country that is still not up to its fullest capacity.

I believe in the fairy tale.

I believe in the wish of the fairy tale as the beginning of science.

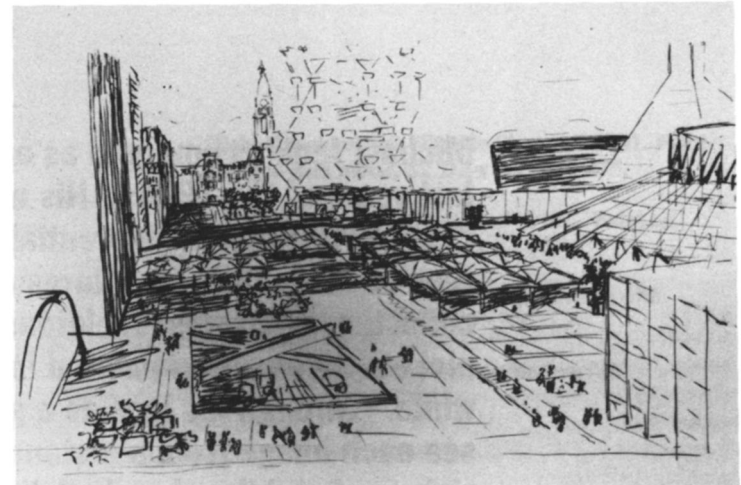
In an information age, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate an architecture that exists and communicates its presence not by a reproducible image but by a physical presence that can only be perceived through actual confrontation with its physical reality. To what extent does your architecture relate to the realm of fiction?

You wish you could fly, especially when you are being attacked by ruffians. That's not possible in certain ages because things don't come together in quite that way, but the wish is still there. It comes about because anything man can think about is in the realm of reality. Reality is the dream. Reality is the fairy tale.

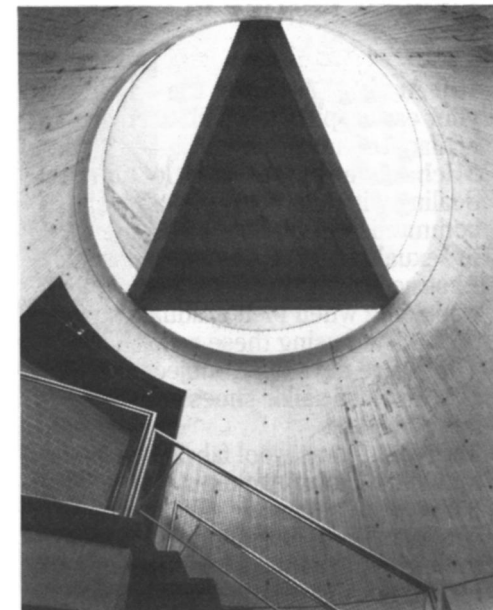
The true reality is the fairy tale, not the everyday course of things, which is only circumstantially living the fairy tale, full of disappointments, full of less than what you'd expect. That's not man at all. Experience is purely incidental. The unattainable, the not yet made, yet not said, is what motivates man.

Art is the giver of a light.

When you hear the familiar strains of the Fifth Symphony, it is like a relative entering the room whom you haven't seen



Above, Louis Kahn, "Market Street East, Philadelphia, PA. Perspective of Civic Center," 1957. Ink on paper. Below, Yale University Art Gallery c. 1953 Grant Mudford



in a long time, and you realize for the first time that his eyes are blue.

Seeing something again is an important aspect of art. You don't ever see all at one time. You could see it indefinitely, and there would always be something you haven't seen, because art is a product of the intuitive — the most powerful instrument within us. The intuitive is the most accurate sense we have.

Science can never reach it.

Knowledge can never reach it.

The beautiful thing that the intuitive gives is a sense of commonality, a sense of human agreement without example. Something can be produced for the first time, and somehow it has a quality of having always been there. That is the quality of human agreement.

CARLOS BRILLEMBOURG