

Taking Place: Landscape in the Architecture of Louis Kahn

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# Taking Place

## Landscape in the Architecture of Louis Kahn

While typically accorded form-driven interpretations, Kahn's work may contribute significantly to the emergent discourse on architecture and landscape. Meditations on landscape in Kahn's work and ideas, although present in an unsystematic and sporadic manner, provide a provocative way of thinking about a building's relationship with the landscape. Applying the phenomenological notion of "lived body," a built work is seen not only inscrutably emplaced or intertwined with the landscape but also embodying it, thus making architecture inherently a landscape "event." An analysis of Kahn's work and writings from the vantage point of landscape presents, first, an affirmation of Kahn's particular ideas about land and landscape and, second, a substantiation of the claim that architecture is a landscape phenomenon.

The work and ideas of Louis Kahn are now regarded as a major turning point in the history of modern architecture.<sup>1</sup> In a relatively short period, from the late 1950s to his death in 1974, Kahn produced his most important works, bringing a new orientation into the then deeply assailed state of architecture. While standing on the foundations of modernist ethos and expanding it, Kahn was also responsible for engaging ideas from outside the established orbits of modernism. One such area, something that is typically not discussed in the context of his work, is the matter of landscape.

Although issues of landscape are present in uneven and oblique ways in Kahn's built work, in sporadic ways in his writings, and in an incipient way in his travel drawings, they nonetheless suggest an increasing meditation on and a provocative way of thinking about a building's relationship with landscape. These notions encourage a more complex reading of his work than the more predictable Platonist, mystical, genealogical, or form diagram interpretations.

While the immediate discussion in this essay is about landscape in Kahn's work, a parallel aim is also to claim that architecture is inherently a *land-*

*scape event*. Recent studies have inaugurated an investigation of the critical relationship between building and landscape, and some have opened up new prospects of appreciating modern architecture that was mostly seen as being obtuse to such issues.<sup>2</sup> David Leatherbarrow's writings, most notably, argue for a closer reflection on this relationship and present a point of departure for some of the queries in this essay.<sup>3</sup> He discusses the two categories of thought with ancient pedigree—landscape and architecture—that have now emerged as two distinct disciplinary practices.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Frampton's ideas about "earthwork" and topographical continuum point to an architectural ontology that has clearly been underaddressed in architectural discourse.<sup>5</sup> Various other writings argue for an intimacy between architecture and landscape but continue to describe it through an inherent dualism, with the insistence of terms such as "interdependence," "complementarity," "in-betweenness," and the convenient but unexamined use of the conjunction "and."<sup>6</sup> The discussions elaborate upon the themes of siting a building, the coupling of building and garden, and the choreographed specularity of the body in a natural land-

scape. At the other side of the divide, so to speak, John Dixon Hunt describes landscape architecture as "an activity of exterior place-making," and in its relationship to pictorial art, it "occurs essentially *between* buildings/architecture and paintings/*landskip*"<sup>7</sup> [italics in original]. He emphasizes that placemaking is an art of milieu; "it creates a 'midst' in which we see or set ourselves . . ."

Leatherbarrow discusses how the two categories have been historically seen either as distinct or the same, engendering an almost endless debate about their relationship. As a third option, he proposes that the two are not really the same and not entirely different but are simply similar to each other, and topography is what they hold in common.<sup>8</sup> This essay presents a fourth possibility: that architecture (as built work) is inscrutably intertwined with landscape, irrespective of whether they appear, or are made to appear, distinctive or not. It is this seamless intertwining, and not an interdependence or in-betweenness between two objective entities, that I describe as a "landscape event." The intertwining is a continuous and unpredictable play of the various natural and constructed dynamics, and that is how a building yields to the

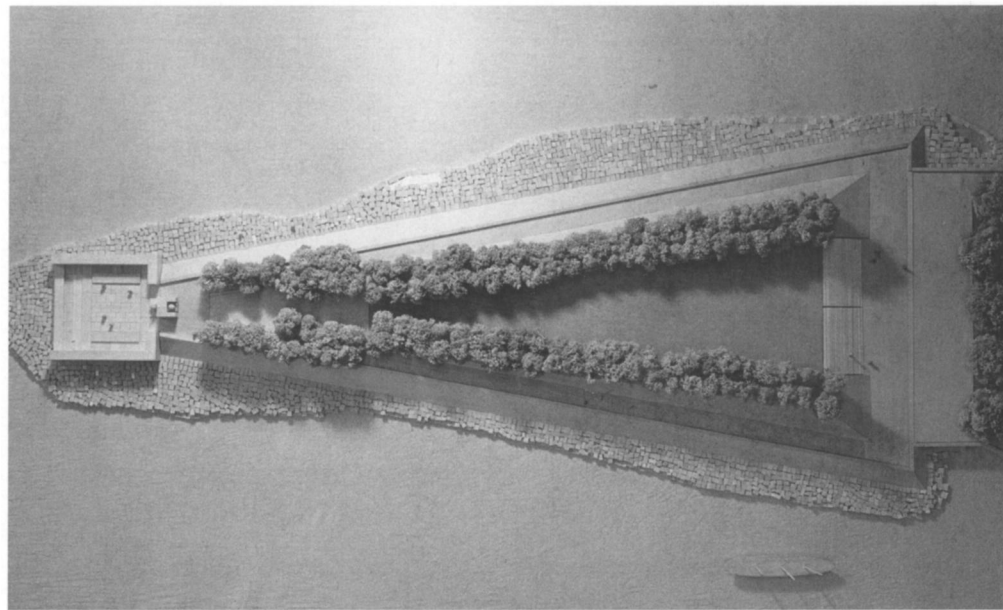


1. Perspective of courtyard with poplars (before December 1965), Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, California, 1959–1965. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission [abbreviated hereafter to Louis I. Kahn Collection].)

envirioning world, and shared latency “rises to the visible” to make an event.<sup>9</sup>

While all built work constitutes an engagement with landscape whether it is articulated or not, I have focused on Kahn’s work because it substantiates my proposition of architecture as inherently a landscape event.<sup>10</sup>

To start with, Kahn did talk about landscape as garden and of the latter is a site with which a building may enter into a dialogue, thus making, in this case, architecture and landscape distinctive entities. Kahn expressed admiration for the work of Gertrude Jekyll, especially her work conducted in a close relationship with the architecture of Edwin Lutyens that brings up the matter of the coupling of building and site as a garden.<sup>11</sup> On another occasion, Kahn saw an analogy between gardening and building. The architect, he said, can learn from a farmer not in making the landscape pretty but “to preserve his crops by the logic of planting.”<sup>12</sup> In a collaboration with Harriet Pattison, two distinctive but dialogical constructs formed the basis for the (unbuilt) Roosevelt Memorial in New York City (1973).<sup>13</sup> A triangulated, grassed area lined with wall-like trees lead to the apex of the memorial—an abstract roofless “room” with high stone walls (Figure 2). Kahn considered the garden and the room as two archetypal forms, the former as a “personal gathering of nature” and the latter as the “beginning of architecture.” The tall “walls” of



2. Model photograph, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, New York, New York, 1973–1974 (unbuilt). (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection, photo by George Pohl.)

trees made the landscaped area closely approximate the psychophysiology of a room.

In Kahn’s own work, horticultural elements play a crucial role in the architectural scheme of a number of projects, such as the row of trees on the courtyard in the early design of the Salk Institute (Figure 1), the yaupon holly trees at the entrance to Kimbell, the ceremonial avenue of trees for the Roosevelt memorial proposal (Figure 2), the carpet of grass for the Dhaka Assembly, and the ring of trees on top of the Theological Library in Berkeley. Regarding Kimbell, Aldo Rossi observed that there is something Grecian about the strategically placed grove while entering the museum that brings an exception in the usual Roman reading of Kahn’s work.<sup>14</sup> Beside horticultural elements, water and hardscapes are also key features in a number of projects, the Capital Complex at Dhaka (Figure 3) representing the former and Salk Institute the latter.

While it is valuable to make a compendium of such landscape strategies in Kahn’s work, this essay takes a different approach. The notion of landscape as expanded here subsumes the sense of gardens and hardscapes even if they are an indication of a building’s continuum to a broader and perhaps more fundamental understanding of architecture (especially when landscape is considered integral to the very corporeality of architecture). David Leatherbarrow addresses that point of view by describing architecture as a topographical art, and naming its fundamental factors as materiality (construction) and spatiality (site).<sup>15</sup> I am consid-

ering built work as taking place in certain conditions and actualities, some of which are pregiven, some constructed, and some that are a modulation of the first. It is this taking place of architecture—being intertwined with the (envirioning) world above all—that is being described as the dimension of landscape. Landscape, in that sense, is a summation of topography and the ambient environment (particularly climate and gravity). If architecture as a landscape event suggests the yielding of the building to the world/environment—being landscaped, so to speak—critical works of Kahn shows that prospect as persuasive and poetic responses.

### Kahn’s “Nature”

Certain notions of nature are certainly incorporated in his various oracular proclamations around order, silence, and light, and yet at the same time there is a deliberate way in which Kahn presents the idea of “nature” in relation to architecture. Kahn conceived of a commonality between the human and nature: “. . . [N]ature records in everything it makes how it was made. This record is also in man and it is this within us that urges us to seek its story involving the laws of the universe, the source of all material and means, and the psyche, the source of all expression, Art.”<sup>16</sup> A building must tell, or at least record, the story of its making, from where it springs and how, and that is evidently a landscape narrative. There is the universe or nature, on the one hand, and the human psyche, on the other hand, the former providing the material and means as well as a certain law, and the latter the urge to



3. Area photo of Assembly Building Complex, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1962–1984. (Photo courtesy of Nurur Rahman Khan.)

express the story of a making, which is art, within the given material and law of the former.

There is also a difference between the human-made and the natural configuration as there is an intentional quality about the human endeavor. Kahn pointed out that while nature has laws, human beings have rules, and there is a distinction. Both the human and nature are part of an eternal process but it is only humanity that can “express” that in a self-conscious way. Kahn, as we know, has spoken extensively on the desire for this expression. Kahn also noted, “One thing that occurred to me, that what nature can make, man cannot make. And what man can make, nature cannot make without a man.” Humanity becomes an agent in a crucial act of transformation.

The most important point for Kahn in considering nature and architecture is that architecture completes what nature cannot make; nature in fact becomes a collaborator in the process that echoes Cicero’s “second nature.”<sup>17</sup> Kahn used a parable to highlight this: “The desire to express comes to the mountain and tells the mountain about its inspiration to build a temple: Look, I won’t hurt you, I am going to take you and treat you beautifully. I am going to cut your edges, I am going to put stone upon stone and I am going to build an enclosure, a place where I can try to express the greatness of eternity of which I am a part.”<sup>18</sup> It is not the idea of an immutable, unchanging nature that Kahn is subscribing to, but to the primacy of constructiveness made possible by the agency of architecture.

In this quasi-theory, Kahn considered nature as an essential bedrock, or a necessary collaborator in the expression of humanity, but proposed a fundamental distinction between what each can do. Humans complete what is deemed as an inadequacy of nature. How else can one explain that much-banded aphorism of the sun never knowing how great it was until it struck the side of a building? Kahn himself explained, “The sun goes along. Man makes something: the sun is inspired.”<sup>19</sup> What may be extracted from this poetic reflection is the consideration of a mutuality between architecture and the environing world that persists in Kahn’s thinking from the cosmic scale of nature and humanity to a more phenomenally palpable condition of site and building.<sup>20</sup>

### Grounding: The Foundation of Architecture

That a building records the way of its making employing the materials, means, and laws of the world is already an indication of a building as a landscaped event or phenomenon. The phenomenon could also be described as a *building yielding to the world*, that is, being emplaced in certain inevitable and ontological conditions. This is what is meant by how a building *takes place*, and how the very act of building is an embodiment of the landscape. Three such conditions of “givenness,” or “realities” may be considered:<sup>21</sup> (1) A topographic/telluric reality indicates that the earth is the ultimate ground basis for architecture, where architec-

ture can be seen as a topographical manipulation of the earth’s surface.<sup>22</sup> (2) A climatic reality is seen as the most direct and visceral evidence of architecture’s interwoven relation with the elements.<sup>23</sup> (3) A geological reality stresses architecture as a phenomenon of gravity, not so much in a technical sense but in a quietly causal way.

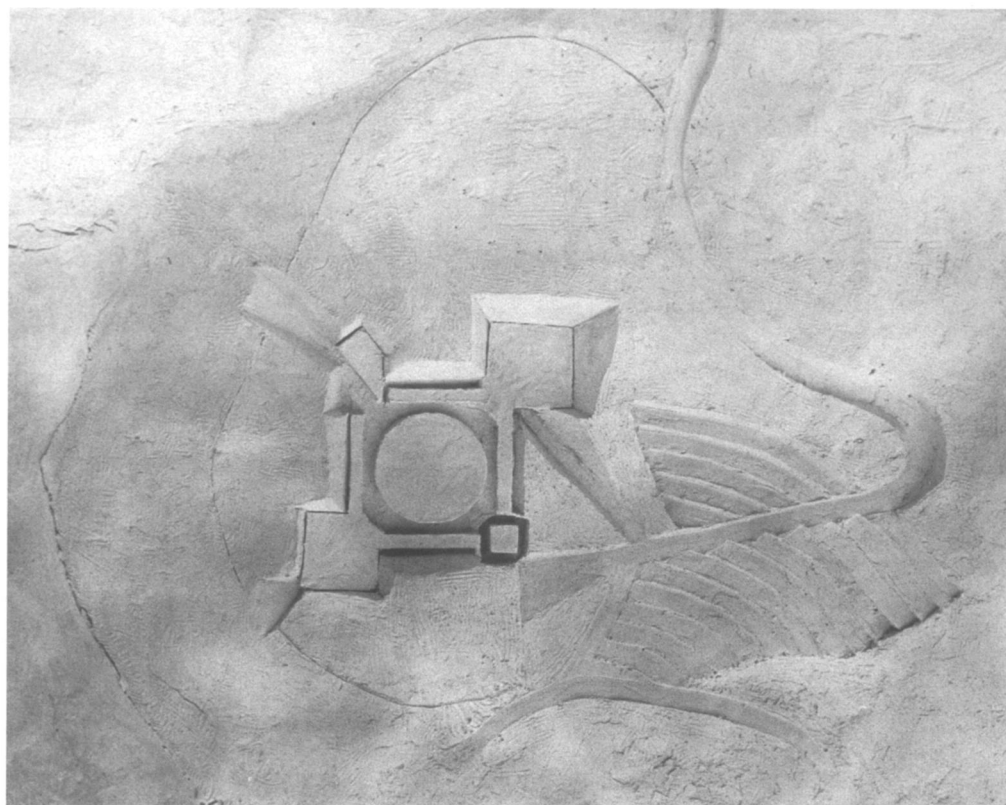
What we have in shorthand are earth, climate, and gravity—the fundamental facts of the environing world. The first is addressed quite directly through Kahn’s notion of “land and architecture” that will be discussed shortly. Climate and gravity impinge on us imperceptibly, two things we take for granted as being given and which yet are essential for understanding *where* and *how we are*. What distinguishes built and actualized architecture from, say, an ideational (or a digitized) one is that it is literally and perceptually embedded in climate and gravity in a seamless manner, in the way Eugene Minkowski in his study of “lived time” describes the body being enveloped by “night.”<sup>24</sup> Invoking Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “lived body,” I am proposing to describe this as “lived architecture.” I am referring to Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the body as something inherently embodied and emplaced in the world.<sup>25</sup> As the body is in the world, so is a building (although this is a vastly simplified analogy as the lived body is a sentient and animate being and a locus of intentionalities).

What can be gathered in summary from Merleau-Ponty’s dense concept is that the lived body is distinct from the classically conceived autonomous body, that is, the object body. The lived body is an environmental notion, something that is inscrutably entwined with the environment/world, where the latter is seen in phenomenological writings as an inherent “manipulatory area” for the lived body, something to be taken in and incorporated. The lived body appropriates certain objects in the world in a manner in which these objects cease to be objects and become “incorporated,” that is, become part of the lived body. On the other side,

the environment directly and indirectly regulates the lived body. The environment conditions the body in such a way that the body is an expression or reflection of the environment. In living, the body not only lives itself but also lives the environment, making the body what I would like to describe as a landscaped subject. This is what Merleau-Ponty describes as a “reciprocal insertion and intertwining” of the lived body and the environment, where “the limits of one are lost in the other.”<sup>26</sup> Giving a more precise and palpable characterization to the term “environment,” the Japanese thinker Tetsuro Watsuji replaces it with “climate.”<sup>27</sup>

It is in this sense that all built works are analogically lived bodies, for a built work, before it is thought of as an object, is already, anteriorly as well as postconceptually, embedded in the envining world. So what is special about the work of Louis Kahn (or for that matter, work of a similar nature)? Does Kahn’s work particularly reiterate the taking place of a building, of its being a landscape event? For Kahn the taking place of a building is not just a given to work with prosaically and technically, or at best picturesquely, but an occasion for an architectural dynamic making visible what remains subsumed. It is through two deliberate operations—the grounding of the built work, and the architectural articulation of the ambient conditions—that Kahn’s work gives presence to the landscape phenomenon.

A segment of Kahn’s architectural thinking can be understood as a meditation on grounding, as addressing the topographic reality of architecture that he broached by pairing the terms architecture and land. An earliest design evidence of this is the “earthwork-encircled” competition plan for the Lawrence Science Hall at the University of California at Berkeley (1962) (Figure 4).<sup>28</sup> It is this aspect, and not only a certain geometric preference or archaic aura in Kahn’s work, that runs counter to the modern avant-garde attitude of early modernism. I point particularly to an “aerial ops,” a view of the world from above that forms a paradigm of visualization for much of modern architectural



production. A large part of Le Corbusier’s conceptualization in the 1920s was possibly generated from the radically and strikingly new prospect offered by aerial flights that would permeate the idea of buildings as autonomous masses.<sup>29</sup> Kahn’s notion in fact aligns with what Frank Lloyd Wright professed about grounding.<sup>30</sup>

There are two ways of looking at grounding: immediate and referential. The unbuilt Palazzo dei Congressi for Venice (1968) is an example of the latter where the reference to the earth as the ultimate ground basis is made through a visualization of gravity (Figure 5). Although the building volume is considered as levitating over a canal (in the final Arsenale site), the pull of earth’s gravity is articulated by the catenary belly of the building (shaped also, it must be pointed out, by the seating configuration inside). What may easily be described as a structural expression of suspension also appears as graphing gravity by the catenary curve. At the Exeter Library (Figure 19), the deliberate modulation of the brick piers on the exterior to be thinner in dimension as they go up is carried out not so much for structural rationalism as much as making the invisibility of gravity and its intimacy to the body of the building be manifested as an expressive act.<sup>31</sup> A far more direct and terrestrial character is revealed in the grounding of other buildings by Kahn.

Vincent Scully describes how, when he and Louis Kahn were visiting Moscow in 1965 and were walking around the Kremlin, he pointed toward some of the famous towers in the area and said, “Look, Lou, how they point.” To which Kahn replied immediately, “Look how they bring the weight down.”<sup>32</sup> In Peter Kirby’s documentary on Kahn,<sup>33</sup> Richard Saul Wurman talks about the AFL-CIO building in Philadelphia (1954–1957) and narrates how Kahn was fussing over the “look” of the foundation and was giving inordinate time to it by actually designing and making models of it. When some of the office people inquired about it, Kahn admitted a concern for how the building will look as a ruin.<sup>34</sup>

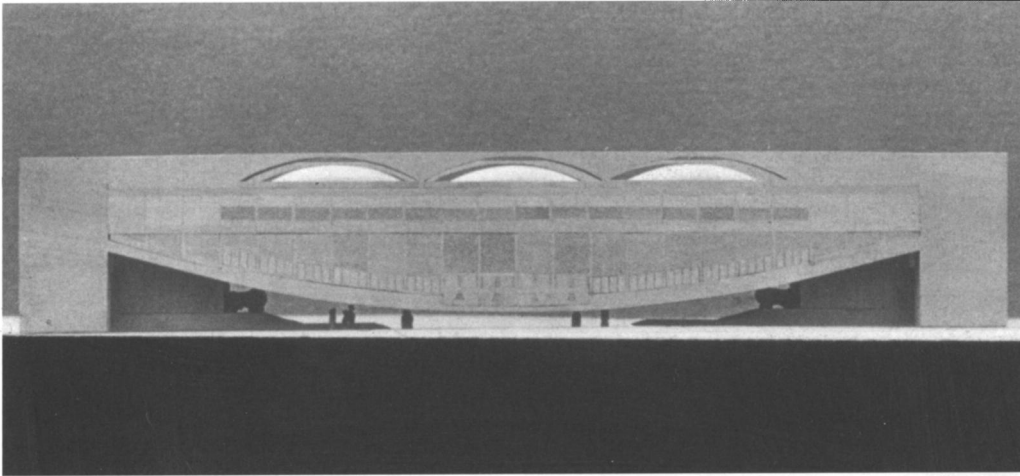
As these anecdotes indicate there is for Kahn a mild obsession with foundation, echoing some of Piranesi’s drawings that present a subterranean outlook, a meditation on the remains of a building left in the last bits of its foundations (Figure 6). After all, foundational remains are the material domain of architectural archaeology, and when it comes to Piranesi, his prophetic archaeological imagination. The foundational remain then is not just a prosaic vector of load but a sign of absence, and absence is the domain of imagination, either of a promise of things to come or, in the case of ruins and Piranesi, of things than can now be imagined (Figure 7).

5. Model photo, ca. 1968, Palazzo dei Congressi, Venice, Italy, 1968–1974 (unbuilt). (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)

6. Foundations of Hadrian's Mausoleum, from Giambattista Piranesi's *Le Antichità romane* (1756).

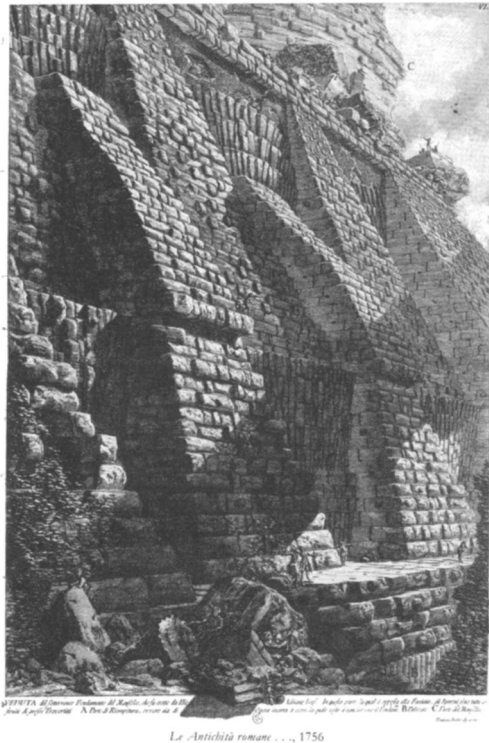
7. Construction photo of Assembly Building, Presidential Entrance, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1962–1984. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)

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At the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (1962–1974), some of the buildings have their foundation literally exposed, as if a stratum of the earth has been hauled away to reveal a subterranean city (Figure 8). In constructing brick buildings, the foundations to the walls stagger out with increasing width according to the logic of the transfer of load, which is conventionally embedded deep in the ground. The dormitory buildings at the institute are articulated with rhythmic parallel walls of diagonally splayed buttresses giving visibility to the transfer of load (Figure 17). In some of the academic buildings, the tiered foundations are literally revealed and not embedded within the foundation trench to be covered by earth. The deliberate exposure of the foundation and its

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*Le Antichità romane* . . . , 1756

7



8. Construction photo, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India, 1962–1974. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)

9. South garden, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1966–1972. (Photo courtesy of Kazi K. Ashraf.)

10. Perspective of outdoor courtyard, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, 1969–1977. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)

11. Sketch of stepped pyramid, Saqqara, Egypt, 1951. (Source: Collection Sue Ann Kahn.)

taking part in a visual architectural narrative may be described as the *aestheticization of the foundation*. At Kimbell Art Museum (Figure 9) and the Center for British Art (Figure 10), while the foundation is not actually exposed, a pit is strategically excavated below the normal grade to reveal, among other things, the lower depth of the building as it descends Orpheus-like into the ground.

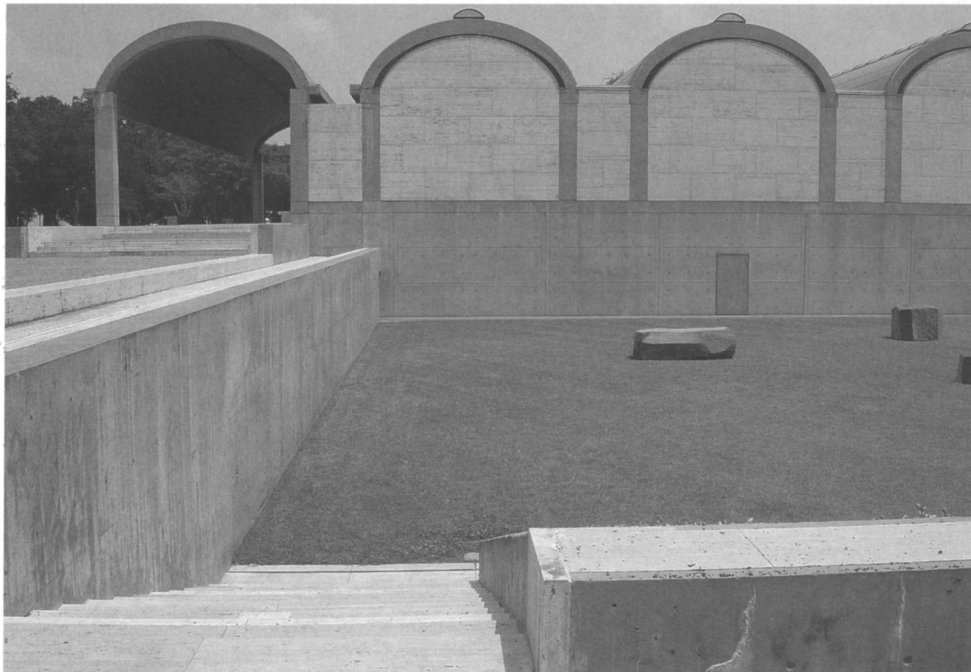
### Drawing a Building

Kahn's travel drawings and sketches provide fascinating aspects about his general orientation toward landscape that have not been fully deciphered. Jan Hochstim's book, *The Paintings and Sketches of Louis I. Kahn*, brings the sketches and drawings together in a wonderful way and offers a descriptive understanding.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, a lack of a fuller discussion of the issue of landscape is surprising, as most drawings are about landscapes and territorial

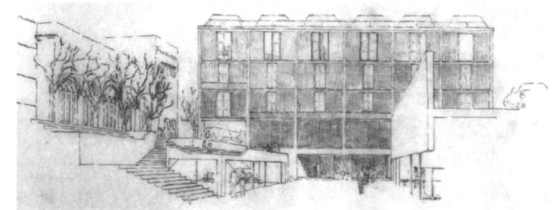
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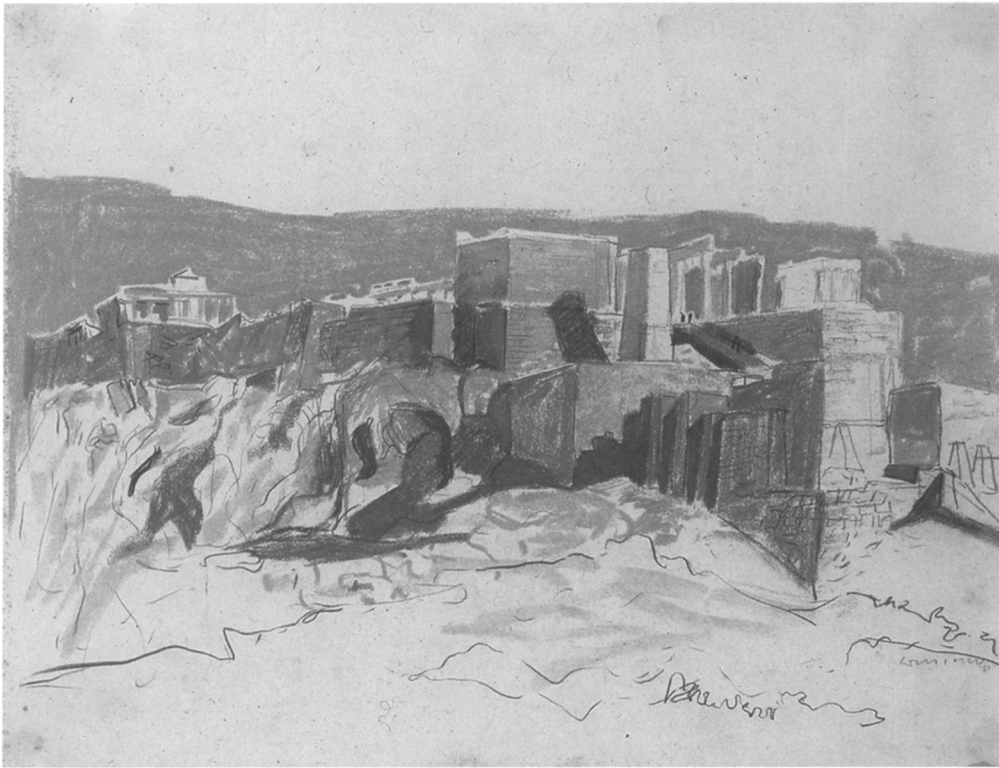


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12. Sketch of acropolis, Athens, Greece, 1951. (Source: Private collection.)

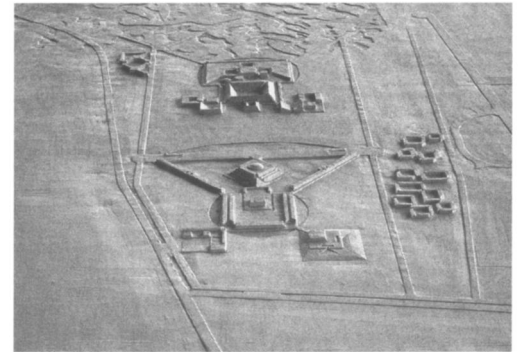
scenes even when a building or a group of buildings is the subject.<sup>36</sup>

Vincent Scully, in the introduction to the book, almost characteristically looks for the “missing” drawings of Ostia in order to establish his original thesis that Kahn’s resurrected architectural position from the 1960s stems from his Roman visit.<sup>37</sup> Yet this overlooks something more important, especially when one studies the sketches of the Egyptian pyramids and the ruins at Delphi from his trips in 1951. In one particularly striking drawing of the Saqqara pyramids (Figure 11), nearly two-thirds of the drawing is devoted to the foreground, a vast landscape of brown and gray earthy mass with a dark sky that prompts a speculation that Kahn is not only thinking about the Platonic or even stereotomic aspect of the pyramidal form but also the nature of its arising from the ground. Similarly, the sketches of the Acropolis of the same period are not so much about the renditions of architectural figures than the landscape that surround them or from which they materialize as crystalline forms (Figure 12). There are also numerous drawings conducted in a stylized and abstract manner that are about consolidating in drawing some spectacular and ambient panorama.<sup>38</sup>

There is also a meditation on gravity befitting an architectural consciousness, and this is revealed

in Kahn’s understanding of the nature of drawing by a painter and an architect. Kahn explains what it means to draw like an architect: “I draw a building from bottom up because that’s the way it is constructed. It depends on gravity. You begin with the way all the weights can be distributed on the land, and then you build up. If you do that, then you draw like an architect.”<sup>39</sup> Drawing from the top, from where it gives to the sky, and then going down, is drawing like an artist, like Marc Chagall. Kahn would say that it is drawing and not building: “You have the same right as Chagall has. He can stop the building right in the middle of the sky and indicate ground. And say, the hell with it. I am not going to go any farther. You are conveying something which shows the prerogatives of a painter, one who knows who can defy gravity.”

This inscrutable relationship of building and land that Kahn had identified is revealed through another seemingly ordinary prospect, in the regular model making technique in Kahn’s office (Figure 13). Clay was the ubiquitous material for producing large-scale site models, a process that was introduced apparently after Kahn collaborated briefly with the sculptor Isamu Noguchi.<sup>40</sup> One could contrast Kahn’s clay city models with the acrobatic forms in a Corbusian model. In the latter, the cubic forms of architecture appear, clearly



13. Site model, May 1963, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1962–1984. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)

designated as extraneous and autonomous from the ground plane of the model. One hesitates about how much can be extrapolated from the technique of model making, but I would like to think that in the case of Kahn the same terrestrial clay lacking any formal entity congealing into crystalline architectural forms strengthens the idea of Kahn’s sense of the fundamental rootedness of architecture, and at the same time privileges the human-made form. There is a moment here of both material continuity between earth and form, and also a disjunction between the two because of the transformation of the latter due to human intervention. It also speaks of Kahn’s conceptualizing methods on the origin and formation of architectural material. Maria Bottero, as early as the 1960s, in a brilliant essay saw this as a mysterious phenomenon in form selection in that, instead of descending from a Platonic realm, “form arises out of a submerged world.”<sup>41</sup>

### The Notion of “Land Architecture”

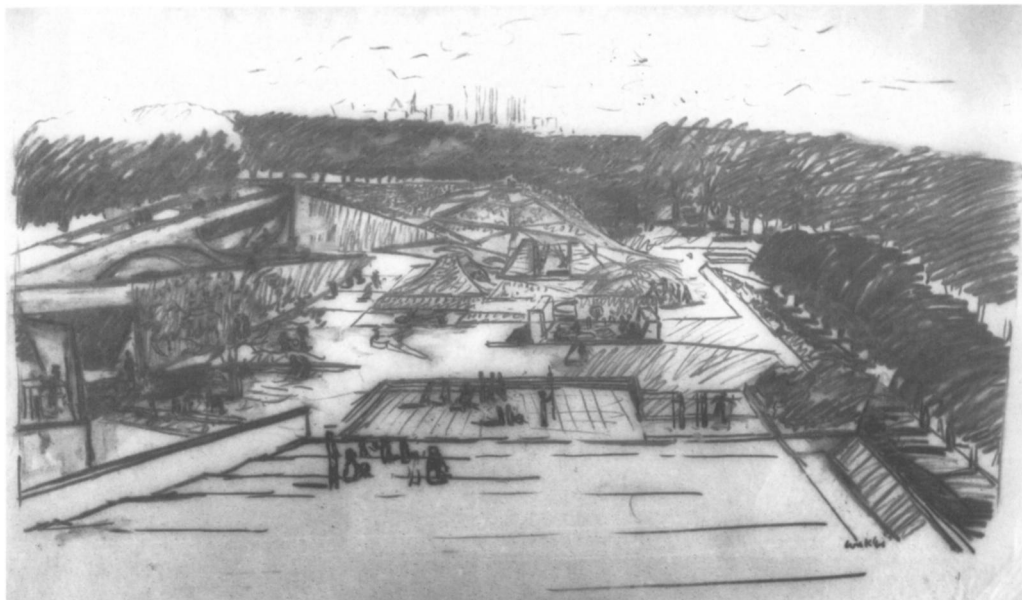
All this is to say that by the mid-1960s, tentative at it may be, and as much as Kahn was working with what seemed to be crystalline geometries and autonomous forms, he was inclined toward the grounding of architecture as a fundamental fact. And he began to consider this in a more persistent manner with a term that he had coined, “land architecture.” It is not very clear from what period in time Kahn started to think of architecture and land in such an integral way with the conceptual rigor promised by the term, but it is likely that his experience in Bangladesh was crucial in reinforcing that idea.

When Kahn visited Dhaka for the Capital Complex project (having arrived there the first time in 1964), and was taken around in the deltaic countryside, he was greatly transfixed by the landscape, especially the immensity of water, and the fluidity of land in the precarious deltaic

hydrology.<sup>42</sup> Kahn was to comment that in the delta one does “an architecture of the land,” meaning that the fundamental building fact is the molding of the earth to provide both platforms and proto-architectural shapes. He conceptualized this primordial fact as the process of “dig and mound,” or subtracting and adding, something that involves an excavation of the ground to create an artificial earth mound on which the building is placed and the excavated pit becomes a fishpond. In any case, the notion of dig and mound becomes the *de facto* basis for the articulation of the major buildings in Dhaka. Another expression of land architecture is the unbuilt Adele Levy Memorial Park in New York City, carried out in collaboration with Isamu Noguchi between 1960 and 1965 (Figure 14). The project is a sculptural landscape for children involving the shaping of land forms in a manner that could be described today as “land art.” The project ended somewhat controversially, but highlighted the contested realm of architecture and sculptural landscape.

Kahn would also take up the notion of land architecture in the academic context. In the teaching of architecture, Kahn did not quite agree to the difference between architecture and landscape architecture in the curricular division that is standardized now. He would simply admit his dislike for the term “landscape architecture.”<sup>43</sup> He would suggest that architecture schools could have two courses for operational reasons, one called *architecture and land* and the other called *land and architecture*. Kahn’s simple but cryptic explanation was that one may be called landscape architecture because the emphasis is on land, and the other may be called architecture because the emphasis is on architecture.

Kahn basically criticized the academic divisions of architect, landscape architect, planner—the setting up of new fields—as marketplace conditions. The division, he argues, comes out of the contingencies of professions, and it is all right if one were to be satisfied by serving professional needs, but “profession is one thing and man is another,



that if you think of serving the profession then you must think of serving the marketplace . . . . And if you think of serving man then you are serving that which can set an example and be an interpretation in completeness, from all angles, meaning to say that an architect cannot entrust the land which belongs to his project to anyone at all but himself . . . .<sup>44</sup> Kahn was considering a recognition of oneness not division, for land was to be treated “as though it were a great conservation, as though you are taking a piece out of the whole.”<sup>45</sup>

Kahn’s idea of land architecture considers the rising of the building from the undifferentiated, nonconscious mass of the earth that, in a converse sense, implies the inevitable grounding of architecture. While grounding is important, that does not restrict the physiognomy of the risen form, for Kahn would insist that even while nature is a partner, “he must plant the tree as a man, as a choosing individual.” Despite the crystalline geometry, Kahn’s conceptualizing saw forms as arising from the ground in some mysterious transformative way, as Bottero describes it, placing it in a realm rather Aristotelean than Platonic.<sup>46</sup> There is then a complicated dialogue between the grounding and the rising, as if the building—a fact of constructedness—rises from the muddy earth into a crystalline form even as the source is still the earth, materially, genealogically, and ontologically.

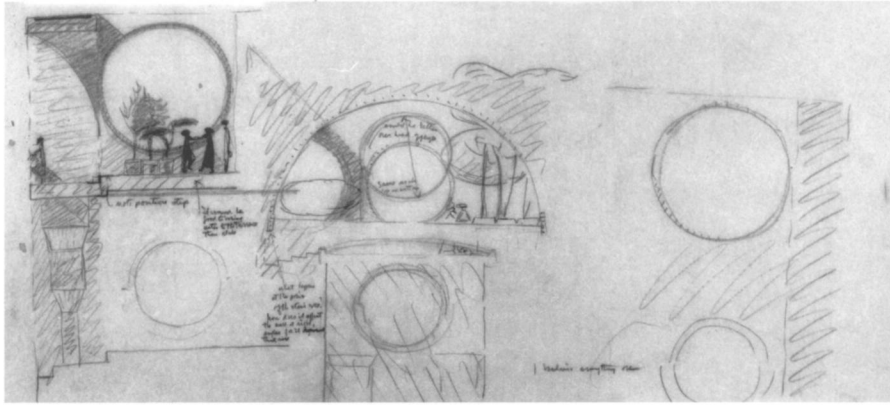
### “Spent Light”: The Ambient Narrative of Architecture

“You don’t know how beautiful the sun is until it strikes a wall.” What to make of this statement,

now over attended into a poetic triteness? Kahn’s meditation presents a strikingly different view than Le Corbusier’s pronouncement of architecture as the play of masses under light, which seems more a matter of the retinal encounter of sculptural forms in light and shadow. What has been described so far as the simultaneously seamless and distinctive relationship between building form and the environing world can proceed from the matter of grounding to the ambient conditions of a building.

With that verse about the sun, Kahn literally turns the gaze around, from form to light (sun), and back to the form. Rather than being a fixed gaze, there is a fluctuation, a reverberation between the illuminator and the illuminated. The significance lies not in a fixed essence in either end of a pole but in a mutuality of the two, the intertwined reality of the sun and the wall. The statement underscores the phenomenon of emplaced materiality, and the inevitable consequence of that, the striking of the sun on the wall. In fact, it is by the striking of the sun on the wall that the wall gains its being, and that is how the reality of the wall came to be designated by Kahn as “spent light.” But for that matter, everything is spent light: “You are spent light, the mountains are spent light, the trees are spent light, the atmosphere is spent light, water is spent light. All material is spent light.”<sup>47</sup> The significance here is that there are no “objects” in the classical empirical or rational sense, but all are situated things and beings, embodied and emplaced in the world.

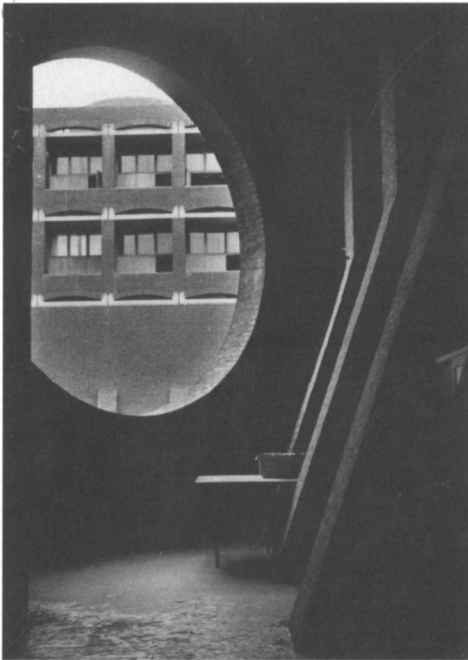
But, at the same time, Kahn is also no romantic naturalist. In the mutuality of things, it is the wall that makes the presence of the sun beautiful, and



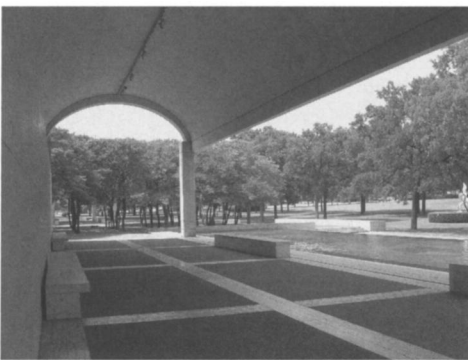
15. Sketch of hostels, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1962–1984. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)



16. Porch, Suhrawardi Hospital, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1962–1984. (Photo courtesy by Shamim Javed.)



17. Dormitory interior, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India, 1962–1984. (Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection.)



18. North portico, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1966–1972. (Photo courtesy of Kazi K. Ashraf.)

to refer back to the potency of human-made architectural form in Kahn's vision, the human makes what nature cannot. The making of a room, for example, is not just a functional act to house a human; it has eco-spiritual reasoning. In a rephrasing of the above statement, Kahn would say, "The sun does not realize how wonderful it is until after a room is made. A man's creation, the making of a room, is nothing short of a miracle. Just think, that a man can claim a slice of the sun."

The crypto poetic utterance reveals a phenomenological orientation in Kahn's thinking. Although there is in any case a seamless relationship between architecture and its situation in the world, an "ontological inseparability," so to speak, Kahn makes that an event through a heightened condition of material expressiveness. Where the sun strikes the wall, at that juncture where a mutuality is only potentially present Kahn allows it to be pronounced, to have an articulated presence. It is the excess that makes the difference in Kahn's work.

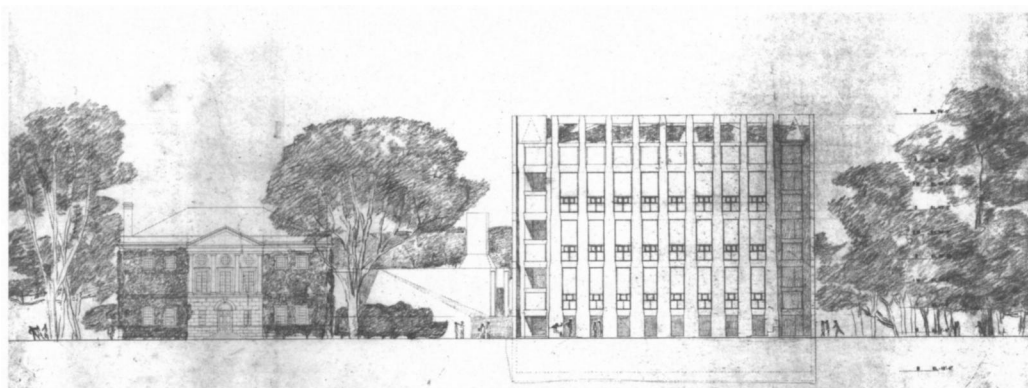
This is another sense of landscaping a building, of allowing a building to be enveloped by the environmental givenness, as in Minkowski's description of night shrouding the body and letting that phenomenon be articulated and seen. To allow that givenness to have presence in the architectural condition is the ambient narrative in architecture, of making weather, weathering, and a climatic collusion part of an architectural epistemology (intended weathering), as Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi point out in a compelling phrase that "finishing ends construction, weathering constructs finishes."<sup>48</sup> If grounding implies the horizontal incorporation of the world in the architectural body, enviroing or weathering implies the ambient dimension. While Kahn intended a profound surface dynamic while conceiving the metal panels for the exterior of the Yale Center for British Art ("on a grey day it will look like a moth; on a sunny day like a butterfly"),

he was more engaged with spatial elements that were deliberately dedicated to the landscape: the double skin, the porch, and the arcade.<sup>49</sup>

When in the envelope of the assembly and the brick buildings at Dhaka, Kahn makes those gigantic perforations, when he makes those cavernous spaces of shadows, he is surreptitiously "landscaping" the buildings (Figure 15). This is landscaping in a phenomenal and visceral sense: how nature—the sun, wind, and rain—seems to invade a man-made artifact, erode its envelope, make its porous, and finally repossess it.

The atmospheric aura is possible because Kahn does not use extensive glass in places like Dhaka and Ahmedabad. When he does use it, for compelling reasons, in other projects, or even in modifications in Dhaka, the box is immediately formed, creating a visual disjunction in the mutuality. "Masonry masses and voids. That's what Kahn wants," Vincent Scully observed but not really explaining why other than the allusion to robust archaic forms.<sup>50</sup> Again, Maria Bottero noticed this early and described the phenomenon as Kahn wanting "an architecture of open forms, integrated with the *plein air* of the surrounding landscape."<sup>51</sup>

If opening up of the building through its perforations and cavities is a way of "landscaping," literally maintaining a continuum with the world, there are a few instances to consider. From the consulate in Lusaka to the unbuilt meeting halls at Salk and the buildings in Dhaka, the double envelope becomes an unambiguous element of the ambient narrative (Figures 16 and 17). While Kahn himself generated a picturesque idea of the double wall as a ruin wrapping a building, he also notes, "... All windows must recede to where the cool air can open to the rooms. The outside of the building belongs to the sun, the interior belongs to the shadows. It is the place where people live . . ."<sup>52</sup>



About the porch that would also characterize his buildings in Dhaka and Ahmedabad, but most dramatically at Kimbell in the Texas sun, Kahn would say that “the porch is a building . . . the porch is an offering to the sun . . .” (Figure 18).<sup>53</sup> The library at Exeter is a compelling articulation of an arcade, another architectural device that is part of the environmental narrative (Figure 19). And what is the nature of the arcade? “The arcade is a landscape thing. It belongs to the building, certainly, but it also belongs to the entrance and belongs to the ground.”<sup>54</sup> The cavities in Dhaka, the arches in Ahmedabad, the arcade of Exeter, the vaulted porch of Kimbell, the diagonal studies at Salk, all are, to use a phrase by Kahn, of the same “order of landscape.”

## Acknowledgments

I thank William Whitaker (Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania), David Leatherbarrow (University of Pennsylvania), and George Dodds (University of Tennessee) for the various help and suggestions in the final development of this article.

## Notes

1. Scholarship on Kahn continues to proliferate since Vincent Scully’s inaugural and influential essay, *Louis I. Kahn* (New York: George Braziller, 1962) up to the recent comprehensive estimation by Robert McCarter, *Louis I. Kahn* (London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2003). *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), edited by David Brownlee and David Delong, is still a major reference.

2. David Leatherbarrow’s discussion on Richard Neutra in *Uncommon Ground: Architecture, Technology, and Topography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) marks this new scholarship. A series of essays take a renewed look at the issue of landscape in the work of various modern architects: Barry Bergdoll writes on the Schinklesque staging of building and nature in Mies in “Schinkel and Mies: Nature’s Perspective,” in *A+U* 388 (January 2003), and in *JAE*’s issue (February 2004) devoted thematically to landscape and architecture, George Dodds examines the landscape dimension in the work of Carlo Scarpa, and Eric F. Kramer analyzes the architecture-garden relationship in Walter Gropius’s house. On more recent architecture, William Curtis has written on the “fusion of environmental art, architecture and landscape” in the work of Tadao Ando in *Tadao Ando* Vol. 3, edited by Y. Futagawa (Tokyo: ADA Edita, 2000), although Gunther Nitzschke commented in that direction in *From Shinto to*

*Ando* (London: Academy Editions, 1993). While my essay may be carrying on a similar exercise with Kahn’s work, I am also trying to articulate a particular idea of landscape.

3. David Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories: Studies in Landscape and Architecture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

4. Leatherbarrow, *ibid.*

5. Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 8. Frampton had already posited “site” as a key condition for rethinking universal modernism in his landmark essay, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA.: Bay Press, 1983). Many architects have of course reflected on the scope of site with varying intensity.

6. Many authors in the above-cited *JAE* issue use “interdependence” and “complementarity” fairly frequently, both terms connoting a duality. A more ontological condition of “betweenness” that supposedly ensues between two entities, architecture and landscape, is suggested by some authors; see Anita Berrizbeitia and Linda Pollak, *Inside Outside: Between Architecture and Landscape* (Gloucester: Rickport Publishers, 1999).

7. John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

9. Jean-Luc Marion, in his phenomenological study of “givenness,” ascribes the following properties to “event”: unrepeatable, excessive, and possible. See Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 159–73.

10. The intention in the essay is also to recover various notions of landscape in Kahn’s thinking that are generally bypassed in the scholarship on his work. Brownlee and Delong, in *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, mention how Kahn’s sensitivity to landscape grew during his relationship with Harriet Pattison (pp. 80–81). Kahn came to know Harriet Pattison in 1959 and developed a close relationship that was to last his lifetime. She was involved in a number of projects professionally and would describe herself as a “companion to his thoughts.” Although it is not fully documented, some of Kahn’s landscape plans, such as that at Kimbell, may have developed in consultation with Harriet Pattison (p. 131). Pattison was working at that time with George Patton, the landscape architect for the project.

11. Kahn noted that Lutyens was a great architect, but he had his limitations. “He responded so beautifully to the landscape architect Gertrude Jekyll that his porches that looked into her gardens had the feeling of satisfying a greater order sympathizing with the garden itself . . . Gertrude Jekyll was also responsive to what would sympathize with his architecture.” From Kahn’s lecture at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville (1972), in Richard Saul Wurman (editor), *What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Access Press and Rizzoli, 1986), p. 137.

12. At the First International Congress of Architects, Isfahan, Iran, in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 99.

13. On Harriet Pattison’s involvement in the project, see Brownlee and Delong, *Louis I. Kahn*, p. 139.

14. *Louis Kahn: Silence and Light*, film directed by Michael Blackwood (Michael Blackwood Productions, 1995). Kahn himself commented on the pre-Grecian temple space for the Roosevelt Memorial, *The Washington Post*, March 21, 1974.

15. Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories*.

16. In *A+U* issue on Kahn (1973).

17. The Roman philosopher Cicero in his classic work *De natura deorum* (45 BC) wrote about the influential idea of a “second nature,” *Alteratum Naturam*, that human beings create by transforming primordial nature (“first” nature) through human activity such as by sowing and fertilizing the soil, channeling the rivers to suit human needs, and planting trees to bring shades in the gardens and parks. As Cicero wrote, “By the use of our hands, we bring into being within the realm of Nature a second nature for ourselves.” “Second nature” has been interpreted diversely since its first invocation and what still resonates is the idea that humans introduced a landscape of elements to make primordial nature habitable, intervene to make it a “home.” John Dixon Hunt, in *Greater Perfections*, proposes a three-tier scheme as an elaboration of “second” nature, where the second would be represented by agricultural and other utilitarian interventions while the third would be about the creation of gardens. One wonders what is the place of architecture in this schema, whether it is a fourth category or a variation of the second?

18. Lecture at Drexel University, Philadelphia (1968), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 29. Kahn used the mountain parable on other occasions. In a lecture at the University of Virginia in 1972, he narrated, “A man goes to the mountain, saying, I need you because I feel you can express what I want to express. The mountain says, I am busy, I am basking in the sun, I am having a hell of a good time. What do you want from me? And he says, I tell you, it’s quite marvelous. And out of his pocket comes a little something, with some columns and pediments. The mountain says, ‘What’s that?’ ‘It’s you.’ The mountain becomes a collaborator as soon as you show him how beautiful he is in the form that man makes him.”

19. From Kahn’s conversation with Peter Blake (1971), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 128.

20. Site can be transposed for a more concrete sense of nature. Kahn described the site as confirming the possible and encouraging agreement on the beginning in the making of man’s place. “The builder seeking a beginning/ is primed by the feeling of commonness/ and the inspirations of nature/ just a fragment of knowing steers wonder to intuition/ and to the acts of expression./ In the presence of the mountain, the water, and the wind/ the desire to express feels the possible/ the site confirms the possible . . .” Kahn Studio, University of Pennsylvania (1969), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 82.

21. I have tried to elaborate these three conditions on two separate occasions: in a paper, “Where Is Architecture,” at the ARCASIA (Architects Regional Council Asia) Annual Meeting on *Globalization and Asian Architecture*, Dhaka (2003), and paper, “Placing Architecture, Presencing Architecture,” presented at the ACSA Annual Meeting, Baltimore (2001).

22. The idea that the earth is the ground basis for all human activity, a referential horizon of all life experiences where the earth is not sensed as moving but is taken as a “fixed ark,” was most powerfully posited by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl.

23. This point is discussed in a compelling way by David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi, in *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).
24. As the body is in the world, so is a building. I find Eugene Minkowski's description of lived body experience, or spatialization of being, particularly illuminating for an analogical rephrasing of building although I am aware of the sentient nature of that body in distinction to a building: "I look in front of me: I then see objects or people more or less distant from me. . . . But I also see life unfolding around me. . . . it is the clarity of this visual space which forms the backdrop against which my own life and the life of other living beings come to unfold. . . . But clarity is not the only substance of life; we also live in the night. . . . But I no longer have the black night, complete obscurity before me; instead, it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it touches me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space. . . . it will be given to it in a particular way, completely different from the way in which clear space is given, and the words "distance" and "touch" seem to bring out this difference very well. The dark night also has something more personal about it in relation to the ego: I remain face to face with it; it is more "mine" than clear space. . . . [also] auditory space envelops me and penetrates like black space; there will be neither free space nor a "next to," neither perspective, nor horizon, nor distance in it, as there is in lived space." Eugene Minkowski, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, originally published in French, 1933), p. 400.
25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962, and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, originally published in French, 1945).
26. S. Gallagher, "Lived Body and Environment," *Research in Phenomenology* XVI (1986).
27. Tetsuro Watsuji, *Climate: A Philosophical Study* (Tokyo: Government of Japan, 1961).
28. Brownlee and DeLong, *Louis I Kahn*, p. 103. Brownlee and DeLong point out this project as an unorthodox competition submission for the time because of the earthwork-based design, a design that made the project ancient-looking to the competition organizer in terms of representing the future of an institution of science.
29. Adnan Morshed, "Le Corbusier and the Aerial Gaze," *Thresholds* 13 (1996). Morshed points to the compressing of the geographic reality as well as the generation of modernist utopia from the detached view from the airplane, "a discovery of the world hitherto unknown from a privileged observation point in the sky." Also, Charles Waldheim, "Aerial Representation and the Recovery of Landscape," in James Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).
30. Frank Lloyd Wright termed this attention to ground as "ground motive." Regarding Broadacre City, he wrote, ". . . the ground will determine the shape and even the style of the buildings. . . so that to see where ground leaves off and the buildings begin would require careful attention," in the section titled "Architecture and Acreage Seen as Landscape," in *The Disappearing City* (New York: William Farquhar Payson, 1932), pp. 47–49.
31. Peter Kohane, "Louis Kahn and the Library: Genesis and Expression of 'Form'," *VIA* 10 (1990): 118. On the expressive nature of the piers, Kohane notes that both buildings and human beings are resisting gravity, so that the user experiences the building emphatically: in Kahn's Words, "the weight of the brick makes it dance like a fairy above and groan below."
32. In Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 297.
33. *Louis I. Kahn: An Offering to Architecture*, film directed by Peter Kirby (Media Art Services, 1992).
34. The ironic fact is that the AFL-CIO building was demolished, and one wonders about the value of that concern.
35. Jan Hochstim, *The Paintings and Sketches of Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
36. In few sketches where Kahn represents an architectural form, they are mostly about capturing ambience as seen in the following figures in Hochstim's book: Drawing No. 117, 127 (coming storm), 140 (farming village), 253 (white church, Rockport), 329 (abstract planes in landscape), and the well-known Baptistery scene from Siena, 340.
37. Scully comments, "It is disappointing that more drawings by Kahn of the ruins of Roman brick and concrete architecture have not come to light," Hochstim, *Paintings*, p. 15–16.
38. I especially refer to the sketches of the peak of Arakhova (Drawing 358–59), and the landscape of Delphi with the sanctuary of Apollo (Drawing 363–65), Hochstim, *Paintings*.
39. From a conversation with Robert Wemischnr, in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 121.
40. Robert McCarter mentioned this in a conversation with me. Also, see McCarter, *Louis I. Kahn* (London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2003).
41. Maria Bottero, "Organic and Rational Morphology in Louis Kahn," in *Zodiac* 17 (1967).
42. An issue that intrigued Kahn the moment he arrived in Dhaka, something that was also a point of entry for me into his thinking about landscape, was, "How are the buildings to take their place on the land?" Kahn also intuited for the project that "the two elements of nature most pervasive in the landscape of [Bangladesh] are water and vegetation. They almost assert their presence. The examples of intelligent cooperation with these pervasive elements of water and vegetation in some of the best examples of Mughal garden architecture have been a great inspiration for me." Box LIK 120, Louis I. Kahn Collection, Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.
43. Kahn in a lecture at Drexel University: "It sounds prissy to me. . . land architecture sounds great, nobody lives up to it. . . . I hope they become land architects instead of land-scraping architects." Lecture at Drexel University, Philadelphia (1968), Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 31.
44. Interview in *VIA* magazine, Philadelphia (1969), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 38.
45. If it were to change to land architect, then "I would say that even the President of the United States would understand his role in the affairs of the world. As landscape architect he cannot, as land architect he can, and as land architect I showed him so many ways how nature can be the great partner of his work. . . and the architect is called in as the advocate of nature, and makes everything in the deepest respect for nature by not imitating it at all. . . . He must plant the tree as a man, a choosing individual, and conscious man, which nature, not being conscious, makes," in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 121.
46. Bottero, *ibid*.
47. Lecture at Drexel University (1968), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 29.
48. The notion of "weathering" as discussed by Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow in *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993) is considered as the natural dynamic on the exterior surface of a building, but more importantly the authors argue for weathering as not a subtraction but something that can add or enhance the building. "While it may be possible to see all weathering as deterioration, the production of distracting marks that dirty the original surfaces, the recognition of the play of shadows and the inevitability of marking suggests an alternative interpretation, one of weathering as a process that can productively modify a building over time," p. 42. Weathering "exchanges the roles of art and nature. In design, art is assumed to be the power or agency that forms nature; in the life or time of a construction, however, nature re-forms the 'finished' art work," p. 64.
49. "Intended weathering" may be seen in the work of many architects, from Kahn to Peter Zumthor (Church in Graubunden, Switzerland) and Jean Nouvel (Pavilion on Lake Murten, Switzerland) in recent times, where the fact of weathering is part of an active design strategy.
50. Vincent Scully, *Modern Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1961).
51. Bottero, *ibid*.
52. Lecture by Kahn in Philadelphia (1973), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 217.
53. From interview with John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, *Conversation with Architects* (1973), in Wurman, p. 197. On another occasion, "The order of light tells you that the porch belongs to the sun and the place inside the porch belongs to man," at the International Congress of Architects, Isfahan, Iran, 1970, Wurman, p. 92.
54. Comments by Kahn at the Philip Exeter Library, Exeter (1972), in Wurman, *What Will Be*, p. 181.