Authenticity, Abstraction and the Ancient Sense: Le Corbusier's and Louis Kahn's Ideas of Parliament

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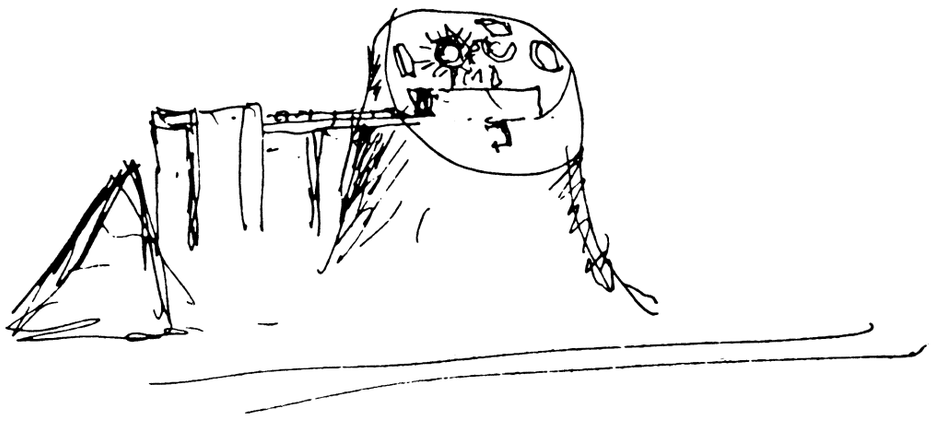
Authenticity, Abstraction and the Ancient Sense: Le Corbusier's and Louis Kahn's Ideas of Parliament



Le Corbusier, Parliament Building, roof structures.

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It is the proper study and labour of an artist to uncover and find out the latent cause of conspicuous beauties and from thence form principles for his own conduct.[1]
Joshua Reynolds

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Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. R. Work (Huntingdon Library Edition, 1959), Discourse VI, Lines 281–283, p. 101; first edition London 1797.

1

According to the incantations of a recent vogue of criticism, the purgatory of modern architecture is over and paradigms, once lost, are now being regained. We learn that "modernism" sinned by rejecting convention and tradition in favor of utopianism, functionalism and a cult of innovation (to mention only some of the supposed ills) and that architectural salvation will ensue once a new communion with tradition has been made. Little is said about the criteria that may be employed to judge the relevance of one tradition over another, or about the difference between bogus revival and a valid transformation of precedent. Diffuse nostalgia is given a vague shape by opposition to a common "modernist" enemy. This adversary turns out to be a curious caricature of some of the progressive platitudes of a particular phase of the modern movement. Modern architecture emerges as a monolithic and determinist entity without subtle internal dissensions or varying preoccupations and traditions of its own. Le Corbusier, Aalto, Wright, Mies van der Rohe and the rest are rammed together with the most debased modern buildings and urban schemes as a sort of collective demonology. Thus an era is distorted and rejected with something of the simplemindedness that the pioneers of modern design employed in the rejection of their nineteenth century predecessors.

The misportrayal of modern architecture embodied in this critique is not entirely the result of propaganda. Ironically, it seems to stem from a warped vulgarization of the view of the subject presented by writers like Giedion and Pevsner nearly half a century ago. These early historians were preoccupied with defining the ways in which the new architecture was different from past ones, and with distinguishing a supposed genuine twentieth century style from the "evils" of nineteenth century eclecticism. Their picture was somewhat undiscriminating over the relative value of individual works and artists: it stressed links to modern technology, to progressive social thought and to the ideal of a modern machine age. The model was historicist in that it presumed a *Zeitgeist* at the heart of the historical and cultural process striving for a holistic expression in visual form. This became the stock-in-trade view in architecture schools in the 1940s and 1950s, when it was also generally assumed that modern architecture must be a good thing. Little wonder that the recent backlash should have been so sweeping, for it has accepted the historical model while conferring on it entirely negative connotations. "Post-modernist" folklore relies for its very definition on the idea of modern architecture as a uniform and essentially rootless phenomenon.

This is not the place to sketch a revisionist history that might take into account the absorption of the past into individual vocabularies within the broad framework of a shared period style; or that might treat modern architecture itself as a complex tradition of evolving types, motifs and themes. If the modern movement involved forward-looking utopian myths concerning the dawning of a new age, it also involved radical ideals to do with the return to fundamentals. Wright deserves to be taken seriously when he speaks of a "cause conservative" or of reinvoking "that elemental law and order inherent in all great architecture,"[2] and we do well to remember that Le Corbusier, the poet of *Esprit Nouveau*, sought touchstones in ancient Greek temples as well as siloes and cars. It impoverishes and misportrays the imaginative structure of these individuals to remove an essential tension that existed for them between the most enduring values of the art of architecture and the need to cope with unprecedented problems in industrial civilization. If one probes beyond futurist rhetoric and beyond the outer skin of style, one encounters the ambition to formulate an architectural language with the rigor and depth of principle of the great styles of the past. The Villa Savoye, the Unity Temple, the Barcelona Pavilion–all buildings with obvious place in the standard sagas of modern architecture–also deserve a place in any study reassessing the essentials of Classicism. "Post-modernist" dogma presumes that abstraction involves divorce from the past, but in the right hands it may become a device through which the artist enters the past on a number of levels simultaneously and then transforms its lessons into an authentic form in the present.

Squabbles between "post-modern" and

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Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Cause of Architecture," *Architectural Record*, 23 March 1908, p. 158.

"modern" tend to have limited critical value precisely because they oversimplify the relationship between invention and precedent. Both sides in the debate are guilty of describing externals of architectural dress without differentiating between the genuine transformation and the pastiche. A soggy critical method can easily ensue which is unable to distinguish between Mies van der Rohe's Lake Shore Apartments, for example, and the routine steel and glass box or–come to that–which fails to understand the difference between a profound Renaissance work like Bramante's Tempietto, and a devalued revival of the same formula. The method reaches its lowest point when precedents are called in as talismans to confer automatic value on copies of them, no matter how feeble. Such critical dangers attend any scheme of classification which stresses the communal aspects of style at the expense of the individual work's special order and synthesis.

This is precisely where the question of authenticity is hit head on, for it is that nebulous quality which confers symbolic and formal vitality on even a wellworn formula. One thinks of the Parthenon, a sublime order within an accepted type, or of Hawksmoor's Mausoleum at Castle Howard, a descendant of Bramante's Tempietto which has an utterly rethought meaning and character of expression; or one thinks of the tension and poetry of the Villa Savoye as compared with the dullness of Gropius' Harkness Commons Dormitories, a building employing analogous stylistic elements like pilotis and strip windows. Dead forms, mere replications of motif, lack a certain tightness between idea and form, and, perhaps as a result, their visual effect is tired and without vitality. One is tempted to paraphrase T. S. Eliot and suggest that the good work of architecture "communicates before it is understood": its deepest and indivisible symbolic powers are exteriorized through patterns of forces that have an immediate and dynamic effect on the emotions and thoughts of the observer. The authentic work transcends the mere mechanics of iconographic convention and touches on areas of a more lasting and more universal symbolism. It maintains an expressive presence long after the codes of particular cultural messages have been forgotten; symbolic and intuitive potency exist far beyond the mere legibility of signs.

If the authentic symbolic form has a certain indivisible character, something similar is true of its relationship to personal and period styles: it blends together a number of stylistic strata from the past in a new and irreducible amalgam. Focillon has astutely written that the principle underlying a work of art is not necessarily contemporary with it: the imagination obeys no simple linear chronology and refuses to be trapped by a single time slot. This is why, for example, it is preposterously simpleminded to call H. H. Richardson a "Romanesque Revival" architect. His architectural system received nourishment from ancient Roman viaducts, from Early Christian work in Syria, from Romanesque examples in the Auvergne and in Spain, from Renaissance Florentine *palazzi*, from Viollet-le-Duc's versions of medieval fortifications, from New England vernacular structures, from the inherited schemata of nineteenth century Beaux-Arts Classicism–and so on. What really matters is that this architect managed to forge these obsessions and sources into a consistent architectural language appropriate to both his own sensibility and the cultural problems of his time. Similarly it oversimplifies Wright or Le Corbusier or Aalto just to call them "modern." They too had their roots in various past traditions: even those of their works that conformed most obviously to the rules of the "International Style" had utterly different internal chemistries and links to the past. One has only to think of the transformation of Classical examples in Le Corbusier's villas of the 1920s to realize that the best "modern" work has rested on a capacity to rethink tradition in new terms. Authentic works possess a sort of temporal depth and resonance: it is even tempting to suggest a substructure of values essential to the medium which is tapped by works of principle no matter what their period.

Part of the power of the authentic work stems from the mythical dimension in the artist's mind. Central personal concerns are liable to crystallize as formal, and thematic obsessions which in a form-maker of depth will have a certain ritualistic capacity to address the values of a broader culture: conventions and societal assumptions may then be refashioned into a terminology of personal force and cogency. The crucial issue is, once again, a profundity of synthesis. But this will be facilitated if the artist has certain typeforms and patterns of visualization that can be gradually perfected to contain the appropriate content. The individual's family of forms emerges gradually as he

extends tradition and begins to clarify personal themes. Eventually, through constant trial and error, a stylistic identity, which is still capable of flexible usage, emerges. The true style is the opposite of a dead formula: it is a basis for perception and expression; it supplies consistent devices for ordering ideas and forms according to intuitive rules and, despite repetition, it is a restraint that allows creative freedom while giving that freedom a direction and an aim.

In a sense every artist is an "eclectic," since he draws on many past examples to define his true manner, yet there is still a vast difference between the superficial assemblage and the authentic work. The strength of the latter lies in its greater formal presence, in its power to move through the action of forms, spaces and proportions, in the fitting expression of a significant content, in the submission of details to the vitalizing *Gestalt* at the heart of the work. Parts and whole, elements and system, will seem to have an inevitable and, as it were, natural relationship to one another. The artist who has found an appropriate language for a genuine myth will also possess the imaginative force to forge together past experiences into new unexpected wholes which are utterly convincing. One thinks of the extraordinary "rightness" of Palladio's fusion of the Classical temple front with the rural vernacular, despite the lack of any obvious connection between the two; or of the Plaisaunce Garden by Lutyens where a pergola vocabulary of polygonal pointed roofs is combined with Doric supports in a magical new synthesis. The solarium of the Villa Savoye is another example of an unlikely combination (ocean liner funnels, Purist paintings, etc.) which still emerges as an indissoluble imaginative compound. The strength of a genuine fusion, in contrast to the mere concoction or replication lies in a realm of intuitive appropriateness which far transcends any passing ideal of grammatical correctness. The key to success seems to lie in a forge of abstraction linking disparate elements. The pastiche lacks such bonds of form and content and remains a superficial manipulation whereas the authentic work is the vital expression of a deeply felt idea.

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There is no simple check-list for a quality as nebulous as authenticity, especially as there will never be a concensus over artistic excellence. Still it seemed worth mapping out the limits of the subject, and insisting that criticism grapple with the difference between the genuine and the fake, rather than advertising fads and fashions. The time has come to concentrate on the genesis of particular examples. I have chosen two relatively recent buildings which belong, in a broad sense, to the Modern Movement, but which also transcend their period, as profound works of art will tend to do. The first is Le Corbusier's Parliament Building at Chandigarh (1953–63); the second is Louis Kahn's Parliament at Dacca (1962–70). Both buildings are rich in institutional and cosmological meanings, both possess an archaic character, and both stem from a stage in modern architecture which had long since rejected a wholly mechanistic utopia. Both are works of maturity resting on clearly formulated architectural principles and languages, and both are steeped in Eastern and Western monumental traditions. To dig down beneath the surface of these works is to confront the transforming power of authentic style.

Le Corbusier's Parliament (figure 1) stands among the other monuments of the Chandigarh Capitol, and contributes to the actual and figurative "head" of the city. Within the acropolis complex itself it is the visual and symbolic counterpart of the Justice building opposite, whereas the Secretariat is subsidiary and to one side. The intended crowning element, the Governor's Palace, was not built, so the Parliament is the dominant structure. The building is obviously a cousin of the late works like Ronchamp or La Tourette. Complex curves come into tense opposition with a cartesian grid to generate the dramatic effect of an *espace ineffable*. Heavily weathered bare concrete lends an ancient and primeval character to the building as if it had stood for centuries rather than decades. A number of rhetorical devices are used to impress the significance of the building's function on the observer. The entrance is signalled by a long, low portico over a giant enamel door preceding an inward-looking box into which the main "objects" of the assembly funnel and the senate pyramid have been set asymmetrically. Thus the internal hierarchy is expressed clearly on the exterior, but these forms also cause a constant tension and opposition as one moves around; they seem to draw the far distant setting into dialogue with the building. On the interior, the funnel-hyperboloid descends into a shaded hypostyle with a grand order made from

mushroom-capped concrete columns—a space that would not be out of place in Ancient Egypt. The outer fringes of the box other than the portico are given over to offices on a much smaller scale and are furnished with deep cut *brises-soleil* which catch the shadow and give the building an even greater sense of grandeur and *gravitas*. In the hot season, when all is parched and brown, the Parliament rhymes with the outcrops of the Himalayan foothills in the distance. Impeccable control of mass, silhouette and surface ensure sculptural tension from any viewpoint. The result is a building of solid dignity, as befits an emblem of state.

To trace the genesis of the main forms is to watch a mature style in action and to see various precedents and examples being absorbed into a work of architecture with its own expressive rules. When Le Corbusier was employed to design Chandigarh in 1951, he fixed the city plan quickly, blending together the principles of the Ville Radieuse, with vistas and boulevards stemming from the Baroque (or even from the example of Lutyens' New Delhi) which he adjusted to the requirements of a democratic state government for the Punjab.[3] Like his British predecessor, Le Corbusier sought a synthesis of Eastern and Western values in his designs for the monuments, but where Lutyens had had the job of anchoring the rule and splendor of the British presence, Le Corbusier had the complex task of expressing the traditions and the capacity for innovation of a newly independent India. He concentrated most of his attention on the Capitol monuments beginning with the Governor's Palace (figure 2), eventually abandoned, in which he established the main symbolic motif of Chandigarh: the upturned crescent form supported on stanchions and creating a shaded space beneath it.

Thus his initial response to India was climatic, and it was this that led him to the common-sense device of a horizontal shading parasol against the rigors of the tropical sun and the monsoons. Such a formulation stemmed naturally from his architectural system, since horizontal overhangs on slender posts were virtually intrinsic to his vision of a concrete architecture. The practical was rapidly turned into the mythical as Le Corbusier sought ways to poeticise this direct acknowledgment of natural forces. Among his travel sketches are some comparing upturned roof structures in vernacular buildings with the silhouette of bulls' horns (figure 3). The bull was a longstanding obsession in Le Corbusier's paintings and drawings, and in this context may have had a specifically local symbolism related to his feeling that India might attempt to preserve longstanding peasant and "natural" values while still benefiting from industrialization. As Le Corbusier seems to have dabbled in "the delights of Hindu philosophy," sacral overtones related to oxen may have been intended too. But the upturned crescent seems also to have been a transformation of an ancient symbol of authority, the umbrella. Perhaps this was known to Le Corbusier through examples like the caves at Ajanta, in which the umbrella could in turn be found standing on a horizontal base extending into space. Or perhaps he grasped the image through the much later variant in Islamic architecture, the "chattri" or domical parasol lifted on supports with a shaded space beneath. Indeed, the Governor's Palace, portrayed at the other end of a sequence of pools and level changes, silhouetted dramatically against the sky, recaptured something of the character of the audience chamber or Diwan-I-Khas at Fathepur Sikri (figure 4). It seems likely that Le Corbusier grasped intuitively the extent to which Islamic architectural vocabularies resulted from a crossbreeding of imported forms and longstanding indigenous ones. He simply added another step to this process of symbolic transformation.

But his aim was not to express another imperium. The dome, with its overtones of centralized, undivided authority and divine sanction for the head of state, would not have been an appropriate symbol even if Le Corbusier had been capable of using one. In his view the symbolic form was a dead one, no longer engaging emergent social realities, and an impermissible one given his preexisting architectural language. So the parasol-dome was transformed into a counter-shape which may, in Le Corbusier's mind, have had a new connotation related to the "Open Hand," an emblem of international peace and generosity embodying the artist's pan-cultural idealism. The upturned shape served further to link the building to the sky and the planets above. Thus a single shape which had already served a variety of representational functions in Le Corbusier's oeuvre, and which possessed certain intrinsic anthropomorphic qualities, was blended with new practical, structural, and symbolic purposes.

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For further discussion of the design process at Chandigarh, see Stanislaus Von Moos, "The Politics of the Open Hand; Notes on Le Corbusier and Nehru at Chandigarh," in Russell Walden, ed., *The Open Hand, Essays on Le Corbusier* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), p. 412; also William Curtis, *Fragments of Invention: The Sketchbooks of Le Corbusier* (Cambridge: MIT Press and the Architectural History Foundation, 1981) and William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (Phaidon, 1982 and Prentice-Hall, 1983) p. 281 ff.

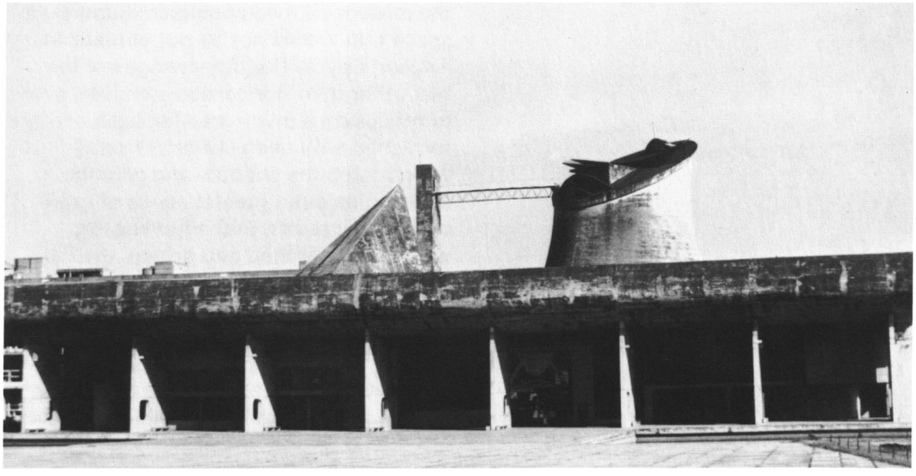
1
Le Corbusier, the Parliament Building, Chandigarh, the Punjab, India 1951-62.

2
Le Corbusier, the Governor's Palace, Chandigarh, project, 1953.

3
Le Corbusier, sketch of bull's horns and roof, 1953.

4
The Diwan-I-Khas, Fathepa Siki, late 16th century.

5
Le Corbusier, Parliament Building, early sketch, 1954.



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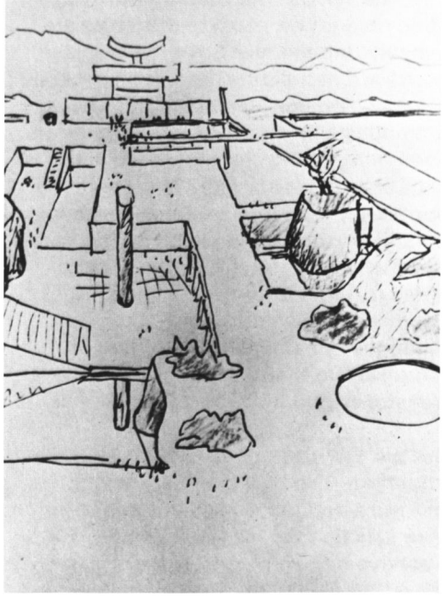

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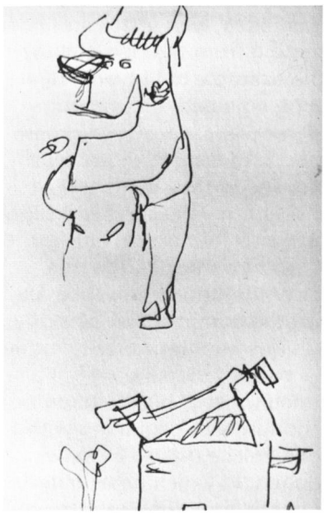

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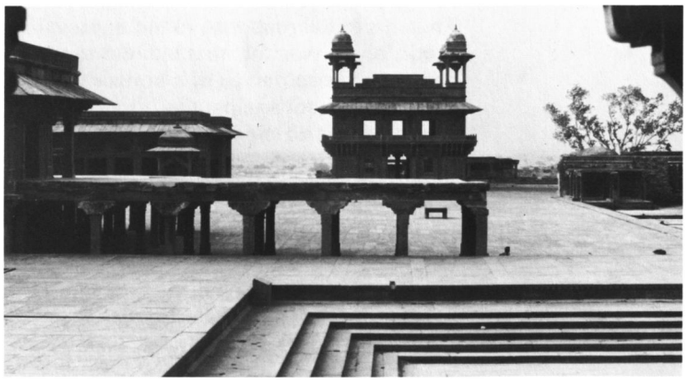

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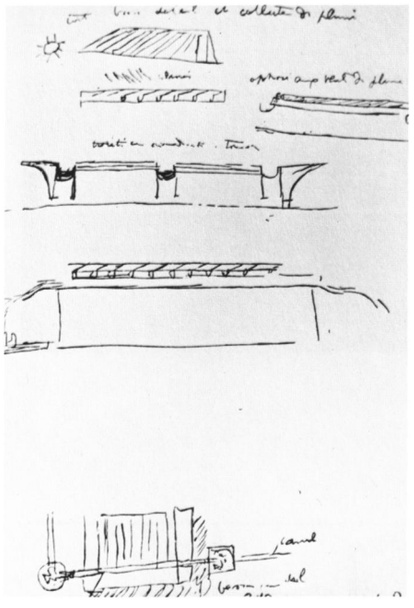

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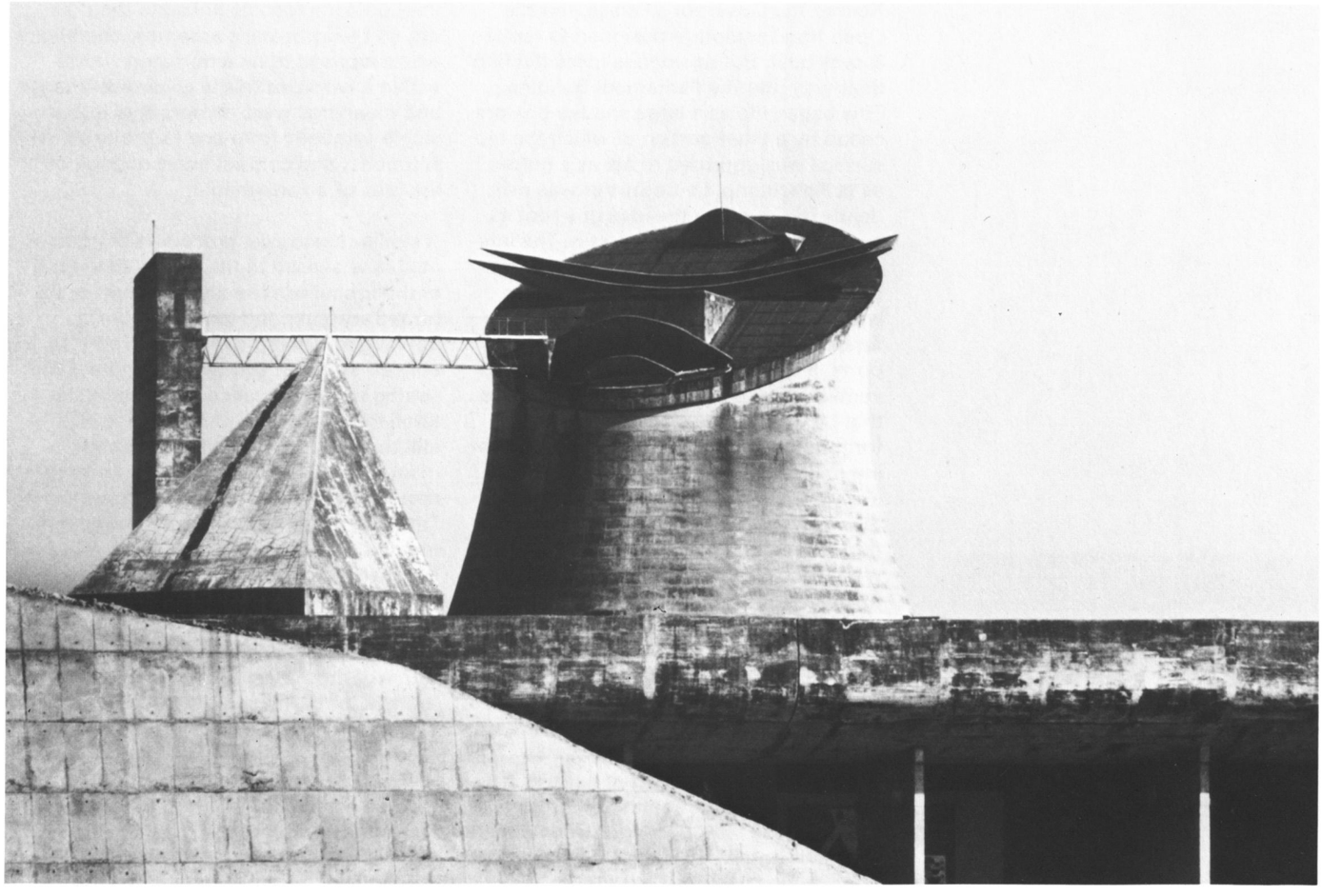
Neither the Governor's Palace, nor the Open Hand sculpture designed to replace it, was built. But analogous ideas did find their way into the Parliament Building. This began life as a large shaded box preceded by a tilted portico of which the top surface was upturned to act as a gutter; as at Ronchamp, Le Corbusier was evidently intrigued by the idea of a roof as an enormous sluice for the rain. The interior arrangement extended a deeply engrained Corbusian pattern: a free plan with curved partitions defining the main functional organs within a grid of supports. It was when problems of lighting, ventilation and rhetoric came to the fore that Le Corbusier broke the assembly form up through the roof to create a lighting and airing system, and a shape with symbolic potential. Among his early doodles were ones referring to the penetration of sunlight and moonlight; there were even curious references to "nocturnal festivals." (figure 5). But while cosmic overtones were intended, the hyperboloid shape seems to have been inspired by an industrial form: cooling towers. The syntax pattern which placed a curved stack in the heart of a box was nothing new: it was a variant on a scheme that Le Corbusier had employed as early as his 1920s villas. But at Chandigarh the stylistic motif was rethought to the demands of the new context, and given new associations. In one version a spiral was shown winding its way around a funnel shape. This provided a practical walkway for the cleaning of skylights, a leitmotif of the Modulor and an image of growth and aspiration: one wonders if Tatlin's Monument to the Third International may not have exerted an influence? And surely Le Corbusier knew the stunning spiral minaret of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, with its stair rising towards heaven? Evidently the artist stopped off in Cairo between Europe and India and visited some of the classic sites. But conceptually, the funnel was less a minaret than a rethought dome. In some sketches he compared its section and lighting system to the dome of Hagia Sophia. Celestial connotations were reinforced when he introduced the idea of a single beam of light to descend from a hole in the top of the funnel and hit the Speaker's area within, at the time of Parliament's opening. This was to remind man that he is "a son of the sun" and to invoke the controlling rhythms of nature in the affairs of man. As to the source, it was surely the Pantheon (figure 6). And just as the Pantheon implied a microcosm linked to the planets, so Le Corbusier's assembly chamber was supposed to be a miniature world within a world. In this way various images and meanings were compressed into a single symbolic form and linked to an institutional and cultural interpretation of the idea of a Parliament.

A similar analogical procedure of transformation is sensed in the design of the top of the funnel with its tilted plaque, its upturned crescent and its counterpart, downward-turning curves (figure 7). To enliven the form and make it address the setting more dramatically, Le Corbusier tilted the funnel slightly. But there was still the problem of having the shape meet the sky. Le Corbusier let it be known that he wanted the top to be equipped for "the play of lights" and that he was thinking of it as a sort of observatory; this suggests, and the form reinforces the suggestion, that he may have been inspired by the extraordinary sculptural shapes of the astrological ramps and platforms of the Jantar Mantar (figure 8) in Delhi (or perhaps the equivalent at Jaipur). Planetary, crescent paths can be found traced in stone in these prototypes, and the artist's doodles and designs for reliefs and enamels indicate that he was fascinated by the contrasting flatnesses of curvature between the sun's path at the equinox and at the solstice (figure 9). The upturned curve, of course, was a variant on the Governor's Palace crescent, and probably bore its multiple loads of association, but could also be read as an armature for carrying the planetary realm. An intriguing analogy is also suggested by some of Le Corbusier's sketchbook doodles where he returns time and again to the image of an oxcart wheel with a crescent shaped chassis (figure 10). Undoubtedly the shape was deeply pleasing to him on its own, but perhaps, like the horns of the bull, it was a metaphor for the long traditions and slowly evolving technologies of India? I suggest that a number of overlapping concerns may have been combined–the slow turning of the wheel, the rotation of the seasons and the planets, the unfolding cycles of human life. Perhaps this was the artist's conception of the fate of man, charted through institutional and moral choices, yet embedded in a cosmic design? As with the parasol, the wheel was an image of complex political and theological meaning in Indian tradition.



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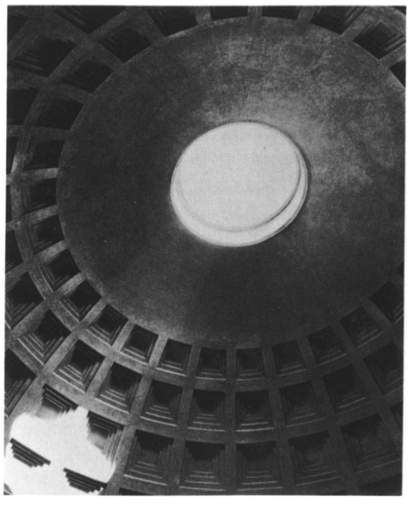

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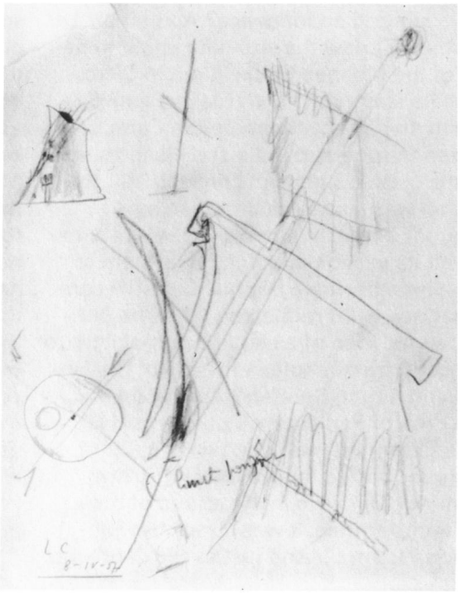

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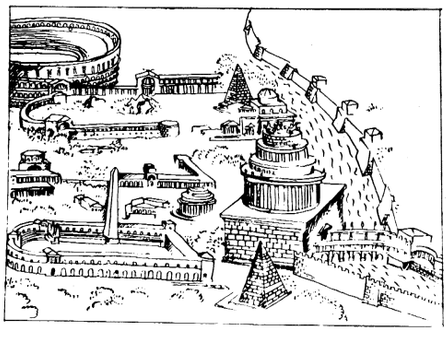

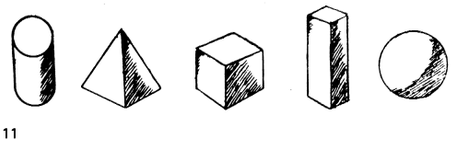

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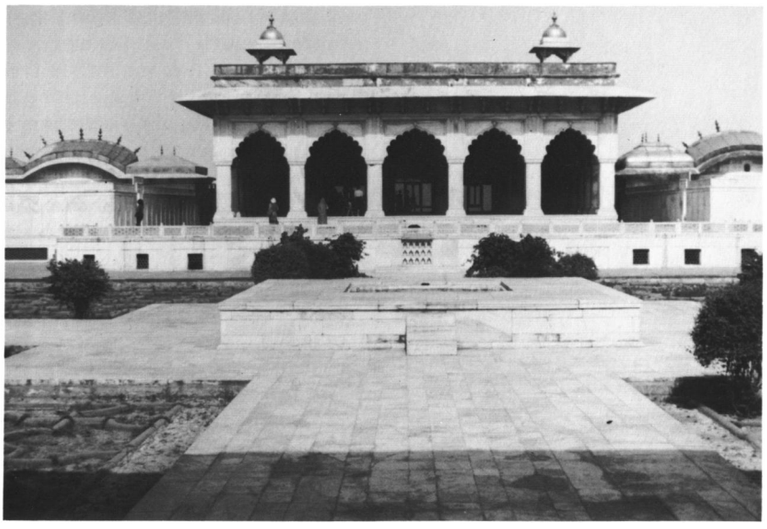
6
Pantheon, Rome, 120 A.D.

7
Le Corbusier, Parliament Building, roof structures.

9
Le Corbusier, Parliament Building, sketch of "funnel" showing light penetrating oculus.

11
Le Corbusier, "The presence of the past and the past of the present," drawing from *Vers une Architecture* juxtaposing the basic Platonic forms with ancient Rome.



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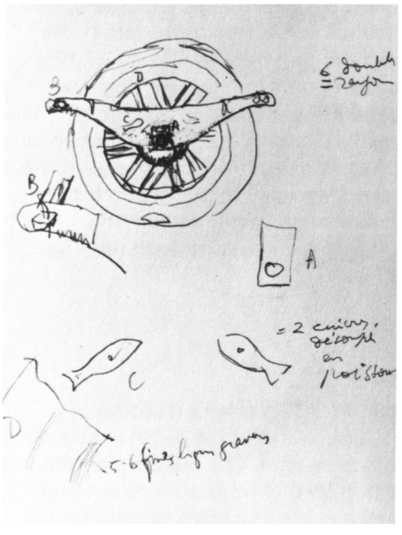

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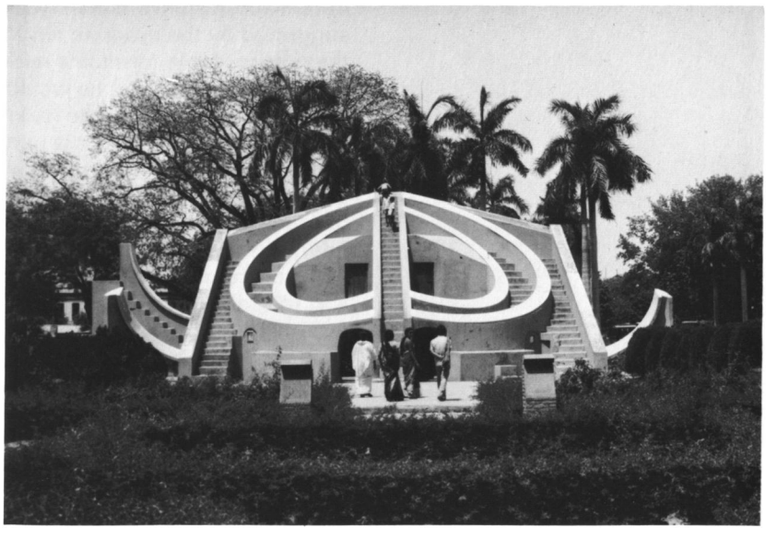

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Jantar Mantar, Delhi, 1724.

10
Le Corbusier, sketch of oxcart wheel and chassis, 1957.

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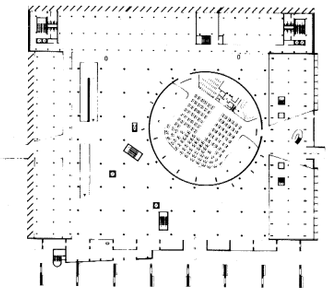
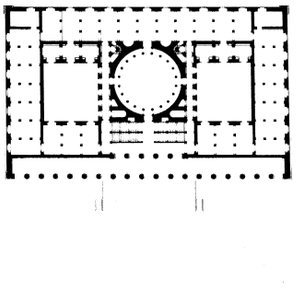
Le Corbusier, Parliament Building (right) and Karl Frederick Schinkel, Die Altes Museum, Berlin, 1823-36 (left).

13
Royal Chamber, Red Fort, Agra, 17th century.





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Whatever the precise intentions (and here more research needs to be done) it seems clear enough that the artist's creative method involved the matching of certain pre-forms in his style with phenomena of the outside world, be they in nature or in cultural tradition (figure 11). Through abstraction multiple readings became possible in a sort of hieroglyphic language. Even the entire plans of buildings could embody a multiplicity of ideas. The Parliament's overall organization was a variant on a type-form combining portico, processional route, centralized domical space and fringe of secondary functions. The model of Schinkel's Altes Museum has been suggested and this seems feasible so long as it is not assumed that the example was imitated directly (figure 12). Probably it is more correct to say that Le Corbusier grasped a hierarchical order suggested by the program which made the portico/dome formula a relevant typological tradition. But he would not have sensed this continuity if he had not approached the institution in a particular way. Just as the acropolis as a whole may be read as an idealization of the balance of powers, so the Parliament plan may be interpreted as an ideogram of the democratic process. The two chambers enter a sort of spatial debate within an egalitarian forum of equal sized supports fringed by a smaller scale bureaucracy and linked to the public plaza by the generous portico which, as in the Altes Museum, may perhaps be read as a descendant of a *stoa*. The portico/dome idea was thus reinterpreted through spatial conceptions descending from Cubism and in a language of elements based on the potentials of reinforced concrete.

It is never quite satisfactory to isolate a single element in an architectural arrangement from its total thought-complex, unless this may serve the purpose of heightening an architect's overall strategy. The portico of the Parliament demonstrates Le Corbusier's general intention of blending together lessons from East and West in a suitable rhetorical form for the main façade. Where the superficial revivalist might have attempted a literal transposition, Le Corbusier tried to probe certain generating ideas and functional necessities of porticoes. His piers were scarcely Classical in character, but they did supply a sort of grand order for the building's frontispiece, and did supply a strong directionality while mediating between walls, *brises-soleil* and columns. Similarly his "entablature" had no direct Classical allusion, but it did nonetheless have an anthropomorphic character from which, arguably, Classicism in the first instance sprang. In turn the element provided shelter and shade while acting as a gutter, and harmonizing with the crescent leitmotif. The shape was well suited to gesture toward the setting, while, seen head on, it floated as a stable horizontal above undercrofts of shadow. From this vantage point the building took on the character of an audience chamber of the type the architect may have seen in the Red Fort in Delhi or at Agra (figure 13). Such state chambers were defined by grids of supports open at the edges for cross ventilation and shaded from sun and rain by deep overhangs. Le Corbusier's solution responded to the same issues of formality, ventilation and shelter, but in his own terminology. He bridged the gap between East and West, ancient and modern, by drawing close to the generating principles of past form languages. In the process he touched on certain deep correspondences between the Western Classical language and the architectural grammar underlying both Moslem and earlier architectural traditions.

3

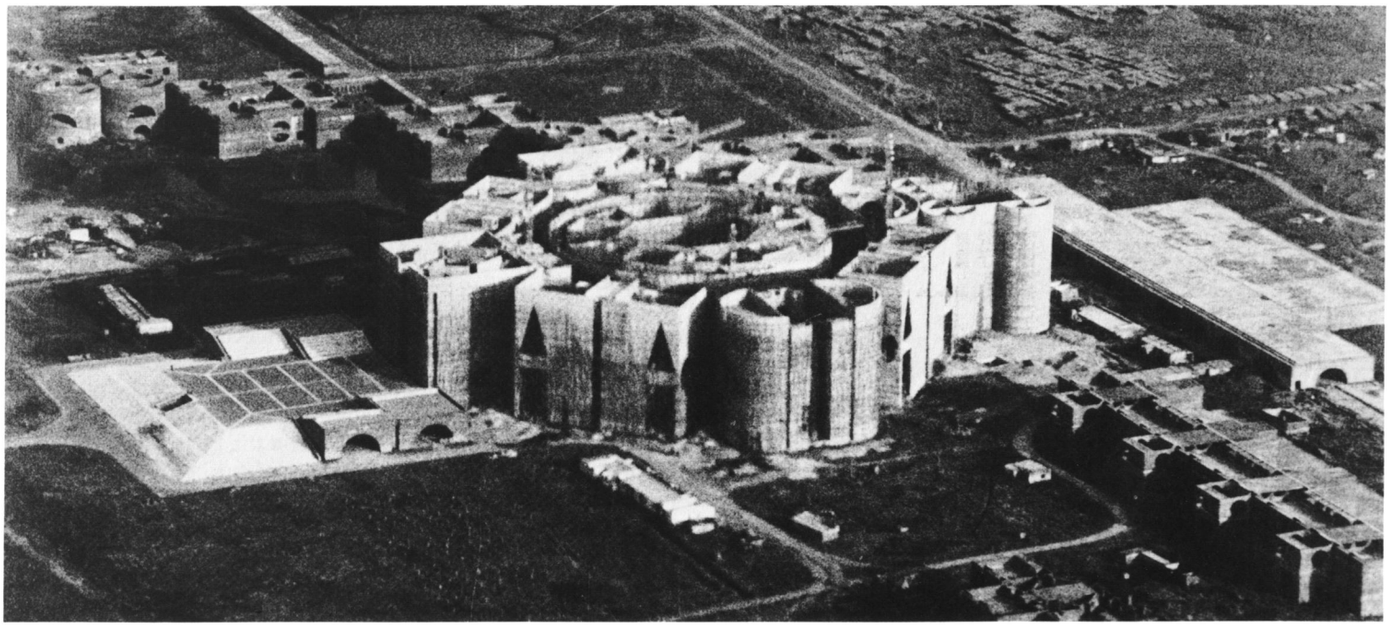
Louis Kahn's Parliament Building at Dacca, Bangladesh (1962–70) is also archaic in character. The building dominates its setting by standing on a raised platform as a sort of fortified citadel (figure 14). There is no doubt that it is the dominant element of the body politic, because it stands at the culmination of a major axis with the "feet" of the Secretariat at the other, lower end. In turn the anthropomorphic image of the city of powers is enhanced by the extending "arms" of the various hostels in an array of diagonal buildings growing away from the Parliament. The offices and supporting functions jostle around the main space of the building in oblongs and cylinders which mediate geometrically between the centric, inward-turning chamber of the assembly, and the diamond format of the perimeter. The same geometrical motifs used throughout the complex are intensified and magnified in the Parliament building itself. A rich variation is achieved where the mosque breaks free from the governing geometry as it inflects toward Mecca. The primary axis of the scheme as

a whole links the Parliament to its setting over platforms and changes of level, but the axis of the assembly chamber itself is switched through 90 degrees.

The volumes projecting above the plan carry the intentions into a robust sculptural expression responsive to light and shade. The rough brick and concrete materials made sense in terms of local geographical and labor conditions, but also matched the artist's intentions of creating a building of ancient character. The vast cylinders and oblongs are punctuated by enormous voids that create shaded and well ventilated areas. If Le Corbusier's conception for coping with climate was a parasol, Kahn's was a protective layer of secondary spaces around the main chamber. This was also a way of registering a functional distinction between member's offices, press-rooms, (the "servant" areas) and the main "served" assembly. In Kahn's mind, no doubt, the gaunt and weathered cylinders, and complex spatial transitions recalled the Roman Baths he so admired: This was the cult of the ruin, brought in to endorse an archaic vision of monumentality (figure 15).

Classical inspirations were so embedded in Kahn's mind that it becomes difficult to single out particular sources. The Dacca Parliament is a case of a building issuing from a family of forms with roots in a number of different phases of the past. The anthropomorphism of the capitol as a whole, the suggestion of a body with a central spine and extending arms, may be seen as a long range reinterpretation of a schematic attitude descending from Palladio's grandest villa ideas with their centralized structures at the peak of a hierarchy, their wings and their judicious use of axes. There can be little doubt that Kahn particularly revered one major descendant of this type, namely Jefferson's University of Virginia, a complex he seems to have admired for its clear hierarchy, its variations of function and meaning within a common system, and its reinterpretation of the Pantheon at the "head" of the scheme. Kahn's instinct for bold and sublime geometries was nurtured by Piranesi's reconstructions of antiquity, while his feeling for abstraction was reinforced by those most stripped of Neo-classicists, Boullée and Ledoux. The planning strategy which sought distinctions between served and serving areas descended from Guadet's Beaux-Art theories, *"surfaces utiles"* and *"circulation"*, and perhaps from particular examples like Garnier's Paris Opera of 1864 (figure 16). It is interesting to compare the plan of this building to that of Dacca (figure 17). There is a strong affinity in the ceremonial use of space, in the variation of structural density and the use of circular and nichelike areas, and even in the way that the mosque is articulated, recalling loosely the "deviant" circular ramps to one side of the Opera. Finally, of course, Kahn's vision of Classicism was enhanced by *Vers une architecture* an anti-Beaux-Arts tract, which attempted to probe the underlying plastic values of antiquity and which contrasted the giant brick surfaces of the Baths and the Pantheon with the late baroque "horrors" of decadent Rome.

If these inspirations were present in Kahn's architectural system, they were thoroughly absorbed long before he went to Bangladesh. But like Le Corbusier, Kahn was also ready and willing to learn from Eastern architectural traditions on the Indian subcontinent. There is little hard evidence concerning his travels or his specific enthusiasms, but Kahn was concerned to avoid creating an entirely Western import. On the basis of his numerous studies for Dacca, one guesses that the integration of gardens, water troughs, processional ways and mandala-like plans in Mogul garden design may have made a deep impression. Moreover, where Le Corbusier's concrete skeleton system of architecture allied itself naturally with the post-and-lintel construction of Fathepur Sikri, Kahn's penchant for solid masonry cut into by figural openings, for centralized geometries and for axial planning must surely have drawn him to the central tomb structures on platforms close to Delhi and Agra (e.g. the tomb of Hummayum or the Taj Mahal). Islamic tomb buildings (figure 18) made a virtual obsession out of the elegant reconciliation of circular, polygonal and square geometries, and one guesses that such lessons were not lost on Kahn. I suspect that he knew the Jantar Mantar (figure 19), especially as the Court of Ablutions preceding the mosque at Dacca seems almost to have been lifted straight from that source, while the President's Platform has an uncanny resemblance to the vast stepped platform preceding the frontispiece of the Jami Masjid in Delhi. But Kahn's grasp of buildings he admired went far deeper than particular elements or surface effects. The Mogul tradition held out numerous brilliant examples in



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Louis I. Kahn, Parliament Building, Dacca Bangladesh, 1962-70, aerial view. The Presidential platform is to the left, the mosque to the right.

15.
Ruins on the Palatine, Rome.

16
Charles Garnier, Opéra, Paris, 1866-73, plan.

17
Louis Kahn, Parliament Building, Dacca, sketch.

18
Plan of the tomb of Muhamud at Bijapur. illustrating the transformation from circular to square geometry.

19
Jantar Mantar, Delhi.

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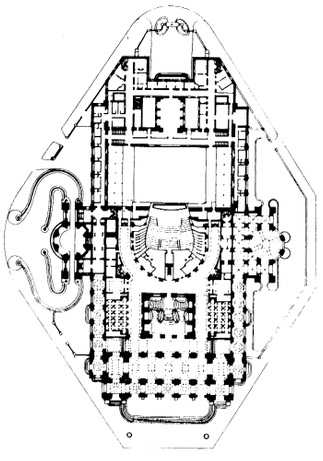

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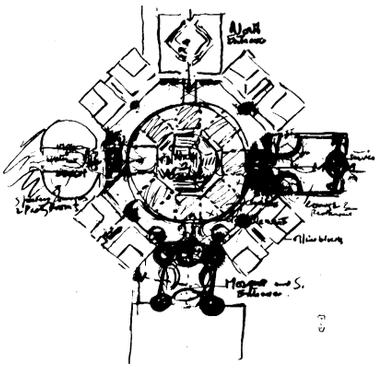

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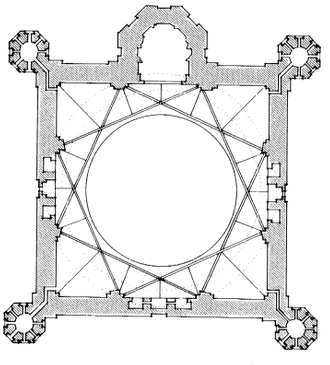

18

the handling of primary and secondary axes, level changes, diagonal perceptions of structure, and the linking of one formal theme to another. What Hindu temple complexes he may have known is uncertain, but in any of the monumental complexes of India, Kahn could have sensed an animating character, a material expression of the world of the spirit, in accord with his own search for fundamentals. Whether the particular inspirations for his centralized form belonged more to Eastern or to Western traditions is not clear. The fact is that he found common denominators between the two. But his preexisting obsessions, and his formal schemata, naturally led him to seek out different underlying correspondences than those which had attracted Le Corbusier.

What stopped Kahn from merely producing a skin-deep Orientalism, or an overblown formalism, was the foundation of an underlying philosophy and a set of symbolic forms linked to the idealization of the social order. He believed it was a primary task of the architect to understand the nature of the institution requiring a building. This was an issue he handled with considerable mysticism and some obfuscation, for basically he felt that forms of social grouping stemmed from a limited number of archetypes. It was the job of a designer to see beyond the surface of a building program to this deeper identity and then to intuit an appropriate generating "idea" (which he referred to Neo-Platonically as its "form") before proceeding to the full realization of the idea in visual arrangement (the stage that he called "design"). Kahn's primitivism involved the conceit of a sort of first building for each type of institution.

> That is why it is good to go back to the beginning because the beginning of any established activity of man is its most wonderful moment. For in it lies all its spirit and resourcefulness from which we must constantly draw our inspirations of present needs.[4]

The search for an appropriate symbolic form for the institution "parliament" emerges if one examines Kahn's doodles and sketches. Evidently he conceived of a parliament as a sort of centralized assembly seeking a unified course of action. In fact this made it a close relative of synagogues and religious spaces in his own private typology of forms. But while the circle was the idealized shape of this sort of assembly, the actualities of parliamentary debate were best handled by a variant on an amphitheater. The slightly uncomfortable relationship of the two shapes is sensed in the plan and illustrates perfectly the tension between an idealized type (the "form") and its actual realization (the "design") whose role is "to adjust to the circumstantial."[5]

Kahn's method of design emphasizes to an extreme what tends to happen in most design processes: An architect's preexisting solutions and style influence greatly the way a new problem is conceived and solved. Time and again in his buildings and schemes, Kahn resorted to square, diamond or circular forms in plan. Time and again he emphasized the distinction between served and serving areas. Time and again he sought to articulate the separation of private rooms from public spaces–the latter often expressed as atria or covered courts of assembly. Essentially, the Kahnian "genotype" was a centralized space surrounded by a fringe of smaller spaces embedded in a thickened structure, and entered on a corner or a symmetrically placed axis. Not surprisingly, the Parliament was a sort of ultimate expression of this formula. While it may be possible to trace the roots of this arrangement to various precedents which mattered to the architect (e.g. the Unity Temple by Wright or various ideal schemes by Boullée), this does not explain the impulses in Kahn's mind that were so satisfied by the shape. Evidently squares, diamonds and circles were so many private cyphers to him: The symmetrical, centralized form was a personalized mandala of a kind.

This is why the sketches are so revealing, for they suggest the way in which Kahn sought to bring into equilibrium his own psychic impulses toward an intuitive harmony, with the symbolic demands of a major state building. Like Le Corbusier, he possessed a language of symbolic forms pregnant with expressive possibilities yet rooted in certain deeply engrained ideals concerning the integration of society with the natural order. His private mandala was able to resonate with a long tradition of centralized symbolism for state buildings. Abstraction became the device through which a virtual archetype was unearthed, awakened and revitalized. His Parliament was an image of wholeness and balance, a theater of the world, a metaphorical wheel with its axis in the

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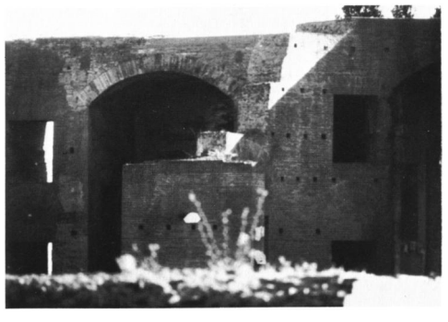
Kahn in Scully, *Louis I. Kahn*, p. 121.



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Louis I. Kahn, "Form and Design" (1960), cited as "Structure and Form" in Vincent Scully, *Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Braziller, 1962) p. 115.

centre and its spokes radiating to society. Like Le Corbusier's Parliament, Kahn's was an emblem rich in ideas, a cosmogram nourished by traditions without, and by a private myth within. By these means, the buildings achieved their prodigious authenticity.

4

This essay began with some observations about the distortions of recent propaganda, especially with regard to the role of precedent in modern design. It should be clear that the reorientation of architecture and the other arts which began toward the beginning of this century implied less a rejection of the past than a profoundly new reorientation toward it involving a far greater degree of abstraction. At its worst this degenerated into banal reductivism; at its best it allowed, and continues to allow, a sort of expressive compression and a research in sensibility into the very basis of the architectural languages of the past. The outstanding works of the modern tradition–among them the two discussed here–have been rooted in this transformation and have rested on new perceptions of age-old lessons. They recall Palladio's claim for Bramante–that he did not copy the ancients, but understood their spirit and their motivating principles.

Alongside buildings of the expressive power and depth of meaning of Le Corbusier's and Kahn's Parliaments, the revivalist exercises that have had so much press coverage in recent years seem flimsy indeed. They remind one that a weak revival is really no more interesting, in the long run, than a weak continuation of a pre-existing norm. Stylistic clothing matters very little if it does not contain a substantial body.

The architect of the moment who seeks a present in the past, or a past in the present, had better seek an alliance with the outstanding works of the modern tradition. For, as well as giving hints relevant to the technologies and societies of the modern world, these buildings also provide links to the vital springs of tradition. If such lessons are to bear a worthwhile fruit, the artist must possess an authentic style, encapsulating a mythical view of society, a formal system appropriate to the guiding idea, and an intuitive sense of order in both tradition and nature: This much was known before the first pyramids were even conceived.