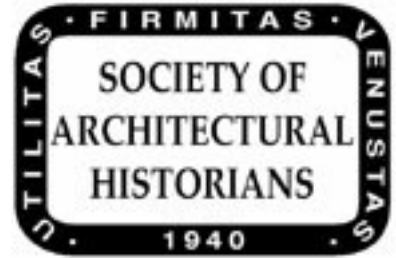




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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 7-11

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Society of Architectural Historians](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jsah.2010.69.1.7>

Accessed: 04/12/2012 12:13

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Louis I. Kahn and His Lenin Memorial

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In 1932 Louis I. Kahn designed a startling memorial to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: two luminous red glass skyscrapers that would have loomed above the harbor of Leningrad, blazing at night as a harbinger of revolution. Yet the Soviet authorities were not impressed, and in years to come Kahn expunged the politically embarrassing project from his résumé, successfully concealing it from scholars until long after his death in 1974.¹ Recently a photograph of his lost competition entry, known heretofore from verbal descriptions, appeared at auction (Figure 1).² It is a startlingly imaginative performance, Kahn's first purposeful attempt to reconcile contemporary modernism with the Beaux-Arts system that had formed him. He would not make such an attempt again for thirty years, and when he did, he would return to the solution attempted here and in surprising ways.

The Lenin Memorial was but one of many ill-fated projects to come out of the three-year bout of unemployment that Kahn suffered at the trough of the Great Depression.³ In January 1932 he was discharged from the firm of Zantzinger, Borie & Medary, where he had been making drawings for the Justice Department Building in Washington, D.C. (1931–34). Not until 1935, when the Ahavath Israel Synagogue project came his way, would he again have steady work. In the interim, he gathered around himself a dozen or

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so other jobless architects and draftsmen, rented a pair of rooms, and drew up a portentous “Outline of the Principles of the Society for the Advancement of Architecture.”⁴ This title, upon reflection, was evidently too bourgeois. Thinking perhaps of the ostentatiously objective acronyms that Soviet architectural collaboratives gave themselves during the 1920s, such as the ARU (Union of Architect-Planners) or Asnova (Association of New Architects), Kahn changed the name to the Architectural Research Group.⁵ In press releases, it would be known as the ARG.

For the next two years, the ARG devised public housing projects, studied slum clearance in Philadelphia, and entered architectural competitions. All proved fruitless, and in May 1934 the group quietly disbanded. Its fifteen members went their own ways, in most cases into architectural obscurity.⁶ The ARG's most enduring legacy was to have given Kahn methodical training in housing, a field that would sustain his practice for much of the next decade.

Kahn evidently heard about the Leningrad competition in May 1932, when it was announced in the English-language *Economic Review of the Soviet Union*.⁷ (For some reason—political hostility?—it does not appear to have been announced in the principal American professional journals: *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Pencil Points*.) The notice invited “the masses of workers” to submit their proposals for “a Lenin monument to be erected in the port of Leningrad,” which was to cost six million rubles (then about \$3 million.) Designs could be submitted until 15 September,



Figure 1 Louis I. Kahn, Proposal for a Lenin Memorial in Leningrad, 1932, photograph of lost drawing (private collection)

after which the five best would receive prizes ranging from two to ten thousand rubles. The prospect was enticing, especially at a time when two young Philadelphia architects had won a major award in just such a contest: in March 1932 Alfred Kastner (1900–1975) and Oscar Stonorov (1905–1970) placed second in an international competition for the Palace of the Soviets (Figure 2). Within a few years Kahn would be associated with both, and it may be that their victory spurred him to try his own luck in a Soviet competition.⁸

At least two other American competitors followed suit.⁹ The modernist sculptor William Zorach proposed a statue of Lenin atop a spiral ziggurat, which he worked up into a three-foot plaster model and shipped to Leningrad in July 1932.¹⁰ Like Kahn, Zorach, was born in the Baltic (Lithuania) and emigrated to the United States as a child with his Jewish parents; perhaps he felt this gave him special insight into the project. Another project came from the Pittsburgh architect Michael J. De Angelis, whose model showed a strenuously formal composition in which a slender reed of a skyscraper, cribbed from Eliel Saarinen's Chicago Tribune project, spurted joyously upward from between two squat blocks containing a museum and a library (Figure 3).¹¹

Kahn's submission was in keeping with the ARG doctrine of collaborative teamwork, and he insisted that everyone who worked on the project be cited. These included Hyman Cunin and Joseph Rovner, two fellow graduates of the University of Pennsylvania who had also worked with him in 1926 on the designs for the Sesquicentennial Exhibition.¹² He also added a consulting engineer, Henry Gravel, who helped determine the appropriate structural system for

a complex that was to rise daringly over a river.¹³ Gravel was not a formal member of the ARG, nor was Raphael Sabatini, the sculptor who sketched the relief sculpture.¹⁴ Kahn claimed the role of principal designer for himself, and together with his team, he prepared the drawings, including the dizzying aerial perspective in which his proposal culminated.

The central motif of the Lenin memorial was a circular public plaza, built over the Neva River and approached via a raised causeway. Where the causeway met the plaza, Kahn placed a pair of 360-foot skyscrapers to form a monumental portal. His description of each of these elements survives in a typescript entitled "Design for a Monument to Lenin to Be Erected in the Port of Leningrad," which forecasts the powerful effect of the memorial on visitors and quotes carefully from the competition announcement:

The primary concept of the monument is that of an open meeting-place for the masses of workers.

The monument is simply and directly approached from the mainland by a lower level for vehicular traffic and an upper level for pedestrian traffic.

Through the portals of two great towers of red glass one descends into the large circular plaza, enclosed by two sculptural arms of stone whereon is depicted the epochal emergence of the Proletariat and the Peasant—from Exploitation, though Struggle, to Victory and Achievement.

The open approach from the sea and the encircling waters of the plaza assure the feasibility of marine spectacles and demonstrations on any desired scale.



Figure 2 Albert Kastner and Oscar Stonorov, Proposal for the Palace of the Soviets, *Architectural Forum* 56, pt. 1 [March 1932]: sup. A-4

The rostrum at the foot of the great towers, dominating the open plaza, assures adequate provision for addressing the masses gathered thereon.

Every point on the large open plaza is at a vantage to view and comprehend the sculptural realization of the epic of the Proletariat and the Peasant, culminating in two great towers of red glass, ever-present symbols of the triumph and achievement of Leninism.

The Monument, as conceived, expresses its functional efficiency in a circular form of continuing interest to the masses, focalized in the great towers of glass that mark the juncture of all avenues of circulation. Simplicity has been striven for throughout to assure a vividness and comprehension for the great masses of workers.

From the subsidiary promenades atop the circling arms, an unceasing variety of perspectives is afforded to the beholder.

Seen from afar, on land and sea, the two great red towers, beacons of Leninism triumphant, dominate the horizon.¹⁵

Nearly every aspect of the proposal testifies to Kahn's close study of European high modernism. The memorial is conceived as an abstract city, in which a few isolated towers stand sentinel over broad plazas, paraphrasing Le Corbusier's *Ville contemporaine*. Likewise Corbusier is the multi-tiered array of viaducts, stacked to separate vehicles and pedestrians. Kahn was a lifelong admirer of Le Corbusier, whose office he had visited in 1929 during the course of his European study year.¹⁶

The towers are something else entirely. These were to be of red glass brick (the typed description called for 50,000 square feet of glass block), "held at frequent intervals by steel ledges projecting out beyond the face of the supporting frame." Behind this translucent curtain wall was "a solid reflecting surface" to make possible their illumination by night, making the design an early example of what Dietrich Neumann has called "the architecture of night."¹⁷ This idea of crystalline skyscrapers was hardly Kahn's innovation, and it stems from the visionary projects made a decade earlier by



Figure 3 Michael J. De Angelis, Lenin Memorial, 1932, photograph of lost model (from *Architectural Forum* 61, no. 6 [Dec. 1934]: sup. 35)

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Bruno Taut. Kahn's contribution was to assign them a symbolic revolutionary function and to incorporate them into an urban ensemble in which they functioned chiefly as dazzling stage scenery (the project description failed to mention any function for the towers).

But the Lenin Memorial was more than a learned pastiche of French and German modernism, quoted reverently. Kahn took his borrowed motifs, flung them merrily into the air, and brought them to earth as explicit political allegory. In plan his memorial recapitulated the most celebrated work of art to come out of the Russian Revolution, El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919), that agitprop abstraction of the Revolution in which a razor-sharp red blade pierces a white circle, causing it to splinter. Of course, the shard of red paving that punctures the central plaza can only

be appreciated from above, which accounts for Kahn's uncharacteristic bird's-eye perspective, and the biplanes that fly dizzily below the viewer.

Yet this is not the only explicit symbolism of the memorial. Not only is there a literal hammer and sickle on the pavement, but the whole sweeping composition—a great crescent crossed by at its center by an upraised shaft—is a freely rendered hammer and sickle. Here all the lessons of Kahn's study of modernism, his year of travel in Europe, and his deliberate manipulation of the symbolism of the Russian revolution, converged in a design of immense authority. It is remarkable that he was able to retain the legibility of representational art (necessary "to assure a vividness and comprehension for the great masses of workers") while achieving the formal poetry of abstraction. Of course, Kahn was not the only architect to try this; Soviet competitions of the time were rife with hackneyed Revolutionary symbolism. And yet few made the same intense effort to fuse simple geometric forms into a tightly drawn unity. These were Kahn's aesthetic fingerprints. The circle, wedge, and prism at the center of the composition, laminated and spindled onto the spike of the towers, is a harbinger of the spare geometry of the mature work, and a sign of terrific internal struggle. One can see why he invested such hope in the project.

And hope he did. As late as May 1934, almost two years later, Kahn was still awaiting happy news from Leningrad. In that month he insinuated a breathless profile of the ARG into the *Philadelphia Record*, which boasted that the Lenin memorial, "if accepted and constructed, will make the port of Leningrad the most striking in the world. Through the portals of two towers of red glass rising several hundred feet from the surface of the water the visitor would descend into an enormous circular plaza from which marine spectacles could be viewed."¹⁸

But this was not to be, as much because of bad timing as for any fault of Kahn's: 1933 was a tumultuous year in the world of Soviet architecture, as the avant-garde collaboratives Asnova and ARU were preemptorily disbanded and reorganized into a centralized bureaucracy. This was also the moment of Stalin's consolidation of power in Moscow and the crippling of the Leningrad establishment led by Sergey Kirov, whose assassination at the end of 1934 launched the Great Purges.¹⁹ At this time of Stalin's disfavor, the Leningrad party was hardly in a position to make a self-aggrandizing statement in the form of 360-foot-tall columns of light. It is not surprising that the papers were soon reporting that "plans for a Lenin memorial in Leningrad have temporarily been shelved by the Russian government."²⁰ All of the entries disappeared into the Soviet archives, never to be seen again. Likely they were lost during the siege of Leningrad during World War II.

But even before then, it might have been seen as a liability for an American to have pursued work in Leningrad. After the purge trials (1937–38) and the German-Soviet non-aggression pact (1939), the Soviet Union no longer seemed quite the progressive symbol that many had found so inspiring in 1932. Of course, prominent Figures such as Henry Ford had dealt openly and frankly with the Soviets, without subsequent recriminations, so the changing perception of Russia cannot be the only reason that Kahn suppressed the project. Perhaps his qualms were as much aesthetic as political.

It is obvious that the Lenin Memorial, for all its sophisticated modernist phrasemaking, was still a piece of Beaux-Arts composition, in its axial symmetry, its tight interlocking unity, and its sequential spatial hierarchy (although Kahn sought to obscure this by describing the spatial hierarchy as "focalized," a pseudoscientific term). To project a monumental axis into the water and to mark its culmination with a portal was a gesture deeply classical in spirit. It had its origin in those monthly competition problems distributed by the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, which formed the basis of the curriculum at Penn, where Kahn was trained. Like his classmates, he would have studied earlier problems for guidance, such as the 1913 one that proposed a Hall of Fame on the Washington Mall and would have extended its grand axis into the Potomac.²¹

This should not be in the least surprising. Kahn had been saturated with modernism since his 1928–29 study year in Europe, and he acquired its visual forms as a toddler picks up words: effortlessly and by osmosis. But how to put these forms together was a problem of a different order, a problem not of words but of grammar. And what was the Beaux-Arts, after all, if not a method of putting things together? By 1932, Kahn had spent nearly a dozen years under the shadow of the Beaux-Arts, four years as a student and another six or seven in offices that ran on Beaux-Arts lines. That his Lenin Memorial would not organize its modernist elements on axially symmetric lines was virtually unthinkable.

And yet shortly thereafter Kahn eliminated axial composition from his formal repertoire, as if expunged by a tremendous act of will. None of his urban plans for the next three decades have anything remotely like a Beaux-Arts organization of space. Without exception they are exercises in flowing form, their relationships oblique or tangential, and skewed like the move of a knight in chess. When Kahn wrote an essay on monumentality in 1944, he no longer conceived of the subject in remotely classical terms, so thoroughly had he quashed his Beaux-Arts habits of mind.²² Perhaps the Lenin Memorial was now purged from his résumé, not because its ends were radical but because its means were reactionary.

At last, in the 1960s, Kahn no longer felt the need to suppress the formal axis, and once the ban was lifted there came those buildings that we think of as most quintessentially Kahn, such as the Salk Institute. Now he felt free to evoke his Leningrad project more explicitly. His Memorial for the Six Million Jewish Martyrs (1966–72), which was to be built of piers of translucent block glass, recalls the Lenin Memorial. So does his unbuilt Roosevelt Memorial on New York's Roosevelt Island, which revisited its parti: a long processional axis leading to a plaza built out to the edge of the water.²³ Even his urban plans for Philadelphia, with their abstracted towers and colossal viaducts, again and again summon the haunting image of the hovering abstract plaza over the Neva.²⁴

The Lenin Memorial was Kahn's first experimental reconciliation of his modernism and his classicism. He seems to have deemed it a failure. But although he later worked to conceal that first attempt, he could not conceal the lessons it taught him, and throughout his career they rebounded, at first covertly and then with growing confidence in the classic-modern synthesis that is the central accomplishment of his life.

Notes

For their kind suggestions and comments I am indebted to Linda Gerstein of Haverford College, Danilo Udovički-Selb of the University of Texas at Austin, and most especially William Whitaker of the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania.

1. The project was first discussed in Michael J. Lewis, "What Louis Kahn Built," *Commentary* 93, no. 3 (March 1992), 39–43; and in *Drawn from the Source: The Travel Drawings of Louis I. Kahn*, ed. Eugene J. Johnson and Michael J. Lewis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 16–18. A typed draft description of the Lenin project was found among the papers pertaining to Kahn's early life that his daughter Sue Ann Kahn donated to the University of Pennsylvania in 2000. Sue Ann Kahn Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as AAUP), call no. 330 I.B.8.
2. The photograph of the lost perspective was found in a lot of periodicals recently acquired by a dealer in Russia, according to Ars Libri Ltd., Boston, which offered it for sale in 2006. *Ars Libri*, cat. 137 (2006), 34.
3. *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, ed. David B. Brownlee and David G. De Long (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
4. Although the papers of Kahn's firm were given to the University of Pennsylvania following his death, his personal files relating to the ARG remained in the collection of his widow, Esther Kahn. Following her death in 1996, they were donated to Penn by their daughter Sue Ann Kahn. They include an undated draft of the ARG's founding manifesto as well as a comprehensive list of its projects, dated December 19, 1933. AAUP, call no. 330 I.B.
5. "Outline of the Principles of the Society for the Advancement of Architecture," n.d. AAUP, call no. 330.I.B.8. This rough draft, with its corrections and marginalia, seems to have been the work of Kahn. Certainly its portentous opening suggests his later metaphysical language: "Architecture should be the visual resultant of the manifold cooperations of thought, social relations, biological activities, and cosmic backgrounds of a civilization." (The line was subsequently marked for deletion.)
6. An undated list names fourteen ARG members besides Kahn, many of them former graduates of the University of Pennsylvania's School of

- Architecture: Dominique Berninger, Urban Anthony Bowman ('32). J. Robert Buffer ('25), Willis Humphrey Church ('28), George R. Copeland, Hyman Cunin ('24), Leon Gould, Milton Bennett Medary III, Howell B. Pennell, Herman Polss, Joseph Rovner ('25), Henry Bryan Stevens ('31), and Anthony J. Schreiber. AAUP, call no. 330 I.B.8. Also see *Book of the School, Department of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania, 1874–1934* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934).
7. "Competition for Lenin Mounment [sic] Announced," *Economic Review of the Soviet Union* 7, no. 9 (May 1932), 216.
 8. Brownlee and De Long, *Louis I. Kahn*, 25ff.
 9. Only one Soviet entry has so far come to light: Kazimir Malevich's ensemble of Suprematist skyscrapers, surmounted by a statue of Lenin. See Danilo Udovički-Selb, "Between Modernism and Socialist Realism: Soviet Architectural Culture under Stalin's Revolution from Above, 1928–1938," *JSAH* 68, no. 4 (Dec. 2009), 466–95.
 10. A study of Zorach's design is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (1970.65.206).
 11. "Lenin Memorial," *Architectural Forum* 61, no. 6 (Dec. 1934), sup. 35.
 12. Cunin, a childhood friend of Kahn, was an eager follower of German events and brought the ARG Bauhaus publications, which he translated for them. Esther Kahn, interview with author, 29 Sept. 1995.
 13. This was conventional reinforced concrete beam and slab construction for the raised arms, while the tower was a structural steel frame, for which six hundred tons of steel were estimated.
 14. Sabatini (1898–1985) studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and his work includes the doors of the N. W. Ayer Building on Washington Square.
 15. The typescript is addressed in pencil to the "Leningrad C.P.A. Secretary." AAUP, call no. 330 I.B. 10.
 16. Kahn visited his childhood friend Norman Rice, who was the first American to work in Le Corbusier's office. Rice maintained that Kahn had no great interest in Le Corbusier's work at the time. Norman Rice, interview with author, 21 March, 1983.
 17. Dietrich Neumann, ed., *The Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building* (Munich: Prestel, 2002).
 18. Robert Reiss, "Air Castles Rise in 'Clinic,'" *Philadelphia Record*, sect. 2 (14 May, 1934): 1.
 19. Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).
 20. See "Lenin Memorial." The competition entries, though unpremiated, do not seem to have been ignored. Zorach charged that Boris Iofan's winning design for the Palace of the Soviets plagiarized his Lenin project. See "Sculptor Charges Soviet Stole Idea," *New York Times*, 8 March 1934, Books, 21; also see "Art: Soviet Palace," *Time*, 19 March 1934.
 21. Kahn might have seen the project by George S. Koyl, who returned to teach at the University of Pennsylvania in 1932. J. F. O'Gorman, ed., *Drawing toward Building: Philadelphia Architectural Graphics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986), 184–85. Waterfront memorials were quite popular during the 1910s, including the 1910 Fulton Memorial competition, won by Harold Van Buren Magonigle, and the 1913 Paris Prize competition for the tip of Manhattan, won by the Philadelphia architect Grant Simon. See John F. Harbeson, *The Study of Architectural Design: With Special Reference to the Program of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design* (New York: Pencil Points Press Inc., 1926), figs. 170, 171, 288, 364.
 22. Louis I. Kahn, "Monumentality," in *New Architecture and City Planning*, ed. Paul Zucker (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 577–88.
 23. *Coming to Light: The Louis I. Kahn Monument to Franklin D. Roosevelt in New York City* (New York: Cooper Union School of Architecture, 2005).
 24. Peter S. Reed, "Philadelphia Urban Design," in Brownlee and De Long, *Louis I. Kahn*, 304–13.