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Author(s): Louis Kahn

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Louis Kahn on Learning

"I love beginnings, marvel at beginnings, I think beginning is that which confirms continuation. I revere learning because it is a fundamental inspiration. It isn't just something we do because we have a duty, it is born into us — the will to learn, the desire to learn is just one of the most, the greatest of inspirations. I am not that revering of education, learning yes, but education is something which is always on trial — because it can never capture, no system can ever capture, the real meaning of learning. The sense of wonder is so important to us because it precedes knowing, it precedes knowledge. When the astronauts went into space and the earth appeared as a marble, blue and rose, I felt nothing less important than knowing. Strangely enough, Paris, Rome, the wonderful works of man which came from circumstantial conditions, left the mind as of little importance compared to the sense of wonder that seemed to prevail at that time. The unmeasurable was the one thing that captivated the mind, the measurable made very little difference.

"From the first feelings of beauty, the first sense of it, and that of wonder which follows it, comes realization, and realization stems from the way we were made. That is because we have to employ all the laws of the universe to be. And we hold within us the record of all the decisions which made us particularly human. There is the psychic record, the physical record, and the choices we made to satisfy this desire to be, which directed itself to what we are now. I believe that this nucleus lies in the leaf, lies in the microbe, lies in everything that is. There is a consciousness I feel in all living things.

"From the sense of realization comes form. Form is not shape, shape is a design affair, but form is the realization of the inseparable parts of what is in realization. Design is to put into being what realization, form, tells us.

"Design demands the form, understands the order. When you are designing in brick you must ask the brick what it wants, or what it can do. And if you ask brick what it wants it will say, 'I like an arch,' and then you say, but arches are difficult to make, they are expensive. I think you can use concrete across your opening as well. But the brick says, 'I know you're right, but if you ask me what I like, I like an arch.' One says, why be so stubborn, and the brick says 'do you know that you are talking about being, and the being of a brick is an arch.' That's knowing the order, knowing its nature, knowing what it can do. Respect that tremendously. If you are dealing with brick, don't just use it as another kind of secondary availability, no, you've got to put it in absolute glory, that is the only position that it deserves. Beginning with concrete, you must know the order of concrete, you must know its nature, what concrete really strives to be. Concrete really wants to be granite, but can't quite manage. And steel wants to tell you that it can be an insect in strength. You know its beauty, its harmony, by the extensions of the material in its fullest capability."

Louis Kahn then speaks of other "original inspirations" which precede our ability to learn, to express ourselves, or to create our environment.

"Stop to think of other fundamental inspirations — for instance, the inspiration to meet. All city planning must be part of the inspiration to meet, and school, somehow, is also part of the inspiration to meet. There's another inspiration which is in my mind and that is the inspiration to well-being. Well-being includes such things as ecology. In this regard, when you see a gentle stream polluted your sense of wonder about the stream leaves you. If you go to a stream that is still clear you feel something ominous about being near the stream, from its position of wonder."



Louis I. Kahn has been Professor of Architecture at Yale, MIT and finally at the University of Pennsylvania. Although Mr. Kahn did not have a major architectural commission until he was over fifty years old, the list of his principal works has grown so extensive over the last ten years that, according to Vincent Scully, "Kahn's achievement of a single decade places him unquestionably first in professional importance among living American architects." Mr. Kahn has just completed the Kimball Museum of Art, Fort Worth, Texas, and is currently developing the Palazzo dei Congressi, Venice, Italy.

Kahn describes the inspiration which precedes man's ability to express himself through the medium of architecture. He makes a distinction, however, between the inspiration or "spirit" of architecture and the reality of structures or cities which are works of architecture.

"There is an inspiration which came to us when architecture became an apparent thing. At first it wasn't apparent as anything else except a kind of inspired moment, which later acquired a type. Its beginning wasn't a type, it was something that had an undeniable urge to be brought into being.

"There is no such thing as architecture. There is the spirit of architecture, but it has no presence whatsoever. What does have presence is the work of architecture and at best it must be considered an offering to architecture itself, merely because of the wonder of its beginning. So, when people talk about architecture being in one age and urban planning being in another and city planning in a third, and environmental design being another one, these are, to me, purely market-place divisions. I feel it is very destructive if on his stationery a man says that he is all these things, which in the market place is regarded as a great advantage. A man who feels architecture as a spirit cannot title himself this way, because he would consider it pure dissipation of the original inspiration. An architect can build a house and build a city in the same breath if he only thinks about it as being a marvelous inspired, expressive realm."

In commenting on his various architectural commissions, Kahn focuses on the need to create opportunities for interaction and expression available to people. He describes what took place among a group of architects who were chosen to collaborate in the development of the bi-centennial plans in Philadelphia.

"The original concept, before any of us got on the scene, was that of making a street, because a street is really a community room. It already has a tremendous binding character and a starting point. There were three buildings together: the Court of the Expressions, to be programed by the great expressors, those who are interested in movies, printing, painting, sculpture, architecture, all the expressive urges; the Court of the Natural Resources which was to be programed by the great scientists who could convey the manifestations of light, air, water, land; and the Hall of the Availabilities connected by a great street in the center. The theory was to invite all people who are learning and particularly those who have no notion of what availability is.

"The Indians, Pakistani, Chinese, African countries, the greater part of the world has not an immediacy of availabilities. The availabilities are there to make possible the urges of expressive instincts. This brings you to city planning. I think a city is measured by the character of its availabilities."

Kahn makes more specific comments on the relationships between design and education. He talks about the nature of buildings, such as schools and theaters, how they must reflect the activities which take place within them.

"School is an availability. I believe in schools of natural talents. I believe if a boy, no matter how young, shows aptitude to dance, he should be sent to a dancing school. He should have other learning, but the center of his learning should be that which he does, naturally, very well. One never learns anything that's not part of oneself. Everything else we learn is attached, glued on, has no real substance. If one is left to what his natural predilections are, he will eventually learn the most difficult subjects merely because he has a feeling for them. Schools, above all other places, should be the center of feeling. There should be no judgment, no comparing one person

“Just because we should not teach nursery school like graduate school does not mean we should teach graduate school like nursery school. Can anyone who sat through the 100 minutes with Louis Kahn honestly say he was not changed by this man’s words?”

with another. It should be a free place. I believe that if you have a classroom of thirty students, in which it is regarded that freedom reigns, you would have thirty teachers.

“Think of a corridorless school, but instead of a passage, which a corridor is, you have a hall, oriented to a garden, a hall which you may call the classroom of the students — it vies with the library for equal importance. Two fireplaces mark the ends of the hall. There are window niches, places one can go to in the school, free of obligations. You would not find that in a program, and I think you shouldn’t find it in a program. The architect, realizing that his first reaction to being offered the opportunity to describe the realm of spaces where it is good to learn, must begin all over again, disregard the program given to him and discover the nature of the room where it is good to learn. He would never present a room, or a series of rooms called seminar rooms 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 — but consider a seminar room as a discovered room.

“They would be rooms where one can choose the environment, where it’s good to talk about what you are talking about — and for the number that are going to talk in this room. And so with classrooms, so with the library, which has this disdainful title today of the ‘information center.’ Just how far that is from the original inspiration is unbelievable — it becomes operation, as though information is not important. A book is tremendously important — nobody ever paid the price of the book, they only paid for the printing. But a book is actually an offering, and must be regarded as such. If you give honor to the man who writes it, there is something that induces the express powers of writing.

“While we are on the subject of natures, having observed theaters, I came to the conclusion that one must think of the auditorium and the stage as a violin, a sensitive instrument where one is to hear — so that a whisper can be heard without any amplification. The lobbies and all other adjunct spaces are merely that which composes the violin case. The violin, and the violin case, are completely different from each other. Going backstage in many theaters I saw what I observed to be just the inside of a wastebasket. I decided to think of it then as the actors’ house, and designed his house a half-mile from the theater. I regarded the green room as the living room, with its fireplace; the practice room, the rehearsal rooms, the dressing rooms, all as if they were functions of that house. I even installed a little chapel where a man could think of his lines alone. I built a porch outside his house, which faced the street on which it was built and then wheeled it backstage, and presented the porch to the house as that which you see when the curtains are open. I was trying to discover the nature around which design was possible. This can also be thought of as what one does when building a house, when you consider the bedroom as being in the field, there’s no roof, so you can see the stars, and the window is limited, because the window is really above you. Then you discover that the room isn’t just a sleeping room, but becomes a sickroom, and then you need a cup of tea, and then you long for the kitchen, and slowly, stealthily, the bedroom creeps to the kitchen, maybe even begs for forgiveness. It combines in a loving way, an understanding way, somehow its strength is gathered not by looking into how things are now, but how they could be made.

“So also the city must be considered, in what can be made, not in how we correct what is made. I think the most inspirational point from which architecture can be understood is to regard the room, a simple room, as the beginning of architecture. You know when you enter your room, how you know it like no one else knows it. The windows of the room are maybe the most marvelous. Stevens, the American poet, said something to architects. He aspired to be an architect. He said, ‘What slice of the sun enters

your room?’ as if to say, the sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building. I think a plan is a society of rooms, that a plan is one in which the rooms have talked to each other.”

In concluding his remarks, Louis Kahn again notes that the basis of education is availability and interaction, whether in the city or in the school.

“Today, a street must be distinguished from a road. A street is a community room without a roof. The walls that flank the room are buildings on the street. It is established also by human agreement, human agreement is at the center. This is what makes a school a school. It is undeniable that a man who speaks to something that others don’t, should be near children so they can benefit.”

