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Tectonic Acts of Desire and Doubt, 1945-1980

What Kahn Wants to Be

A condensed version of this essay was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, circa 1995.

And. Not *or.* Acts of desire *and* doubt. Because if there's desire, there's doubt. And vice versa. If there is *some* doubt, then there has to be *some* desire – desire for something else – that is causing that doubt. This is because desire, as Jacques Lacan observed, is the difference that results when you subtract need from demand. The demand, say, for the attention of love – to use Slavoj Zizek's example of the infant's cry – is never satisfied by the functional satisfaction of the need, say, the milk: "Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting."[1] But if you prefer the words of architects to those of psychoanalysts, then here's Louis Kahn, circa 1968, on the economies of desire and need: "Need is so many bananas. Need is a ham sandwich. But desire is insatiable and you cannot ever know what it is."[2] Or here, circa 1969: "Down deep, man only trusts desire, not need. Need is just so many bananas as far as I'm concerned. Desire is the entire strength of man's striving to live" (76). Or here, circa 1972: "Desire is insatiable, and it is the root of dissension. It is opening up the avenues where desire can be felt" (135). When Kahn, to use that more famous example, asked Brick – these are his words – "what it wants" or asked a railroad station "what it wants to be," this is because the desire, or the identity, of a brick or of a railroad station, is not given, is never given. As always, this desire, this identity, must be constructed. In this game of ventriloquism, the responses that Kahn ascribed to the brick or to the train station always expressed some lack or some excess: Brick "wants an arch," but arches, Kahn replies to Brick, are "difficult to make, they cost more money, I think you can use concrete across your opening"; and while the railroad station seems to be telling Kahn that it "wants to be a street," Kahn says it can only be a "meeting of contours englazed."[3] The particular identity crises to which Kahn refers in these examples are related, of course, to the oscillating social, economic, and political identity crises of that time, that time being the period following the war, and to the concurrent crises within architecture: between collective identification and individual expressionism, between failed attempts at empire and the rise of new imperialisms, between modernist desire and mannerist doubt. I will refer to many kinds of acts here, some of which will be tectonic acts. I'll put this another way: the tectonic acts of desire and doubt to which I will refer are only the precipitate of many other acts of desire and doubt: political, ideological, social, biographical, formal, institutional, disciplinary. It is impossible to separate these issues each from the other, but also it is impossible to imagine that these issues will ever neatly line up or synthesize or resolve without some lack or some excess. It is not a particularly productive task for the historian or the critic or the theorist to *make heroes* or to *predict styles* or to *choose sides* or to *resolve tensions*. What the historian or the critic or the theorist *can* do is to draw on the past, to illuminate, in whatever way, its complexity. This illumination will inevitably *speak* to the present, but perhaps the complexity of the past might even illuminate the complexity of the present, most productively if it does so, as Manfredo Tafuri suggested in his final book, in a manner that "leaves the problems of the past living and unresolved, since they continue to disturb the present as we know it."[4] If there is a political dimension to the practices of history and criticism and theory, it is this: it is the extent to which one's practice attempts to disturb or, on the other hand, to shore up the present – to disturb or to shore up our way of knowing the present, to disturb or to shore up the way the present represents itself (and the past) to itself. Any historical or critical or theoretical representation will make some attempt, or some complex of conflicted attempts, in the directions of disturbance and shoring up, whether one desires it to or not. So: What is your desire? And between what needs and what demands – ideological, disciplinary, institutional, psychological – is this desire of yours oscillating? Whatever your (or my) desire may be, no historical or critical or theoretical method can resolve the tensions of the past or, for that matter, those of the present. Similarly, whatever your (or my) desire may be, no historical or critical or theoretical method can entirely and thoroughly disrupt the attempts of the past or the present to present themselves as resolved. Let me propose that all of these matters circulate around the problem of identity. And its failure. And the failure of this failure. The concept of *the political* may be defined, following Ernesto Laclau, as the very constitutive, the very instituting, dimensions of practices – which attempt to give a fixed, stable, and unified *identity* to these practices (whether institutional, disciplinary, psychological, social, nationalist, familial, or sexual) in order to conceal the very contingencies of these practices.[5] But, as Laclau goes on to suggest, no identity is definitively fixed, stable, and unified. The constructive act of identification always fails. There are always slippages, supplements, instabilities – there are always "'unwelcome effects' . . . distortions and excesses that point to its precarious and contingent constitution."[6] The search for such an ideal identity, that obscure object of desire – that desire, in Freud's words, "to convince oneself that it is still there"[7] – never results in the ideal object. As Lacan observed: "The object is encountered and is structured along the path of repetition – to find the object again, to repeat the object. Except, it never is the same object which the subject encounters. In other words, he never ceases generating substitutive objects."[8] The history of architecture is a history of substitute objects, surrogate objects, stand-in objects, and – it is worth maintaining Lacan's precise albeit awkward phrasing here – objects that actively posit, as objects, their *substitutive* condition. The history of architecture is also a history of their failure, the failure of these substitute and substitutive objects to hold, to shore up the failure of identity. There have been and continue to be architectural tendencies that attempt to develop stable, fixed, and unified identities (certain neoclassicisms, certain neo-vernaculars) and architectural tendencies that embrace the failure of any such identification to hold (certain abstract neomodernisms). But here is the further turn: these failures are not the undoing of identity, but rather *the constitutive condition for identity* – as further attempts to shore up identity are effected in order to fill the lack generated by these failures: "Failure will trigger new acts of identification . . . which attempt (vainly) to master those

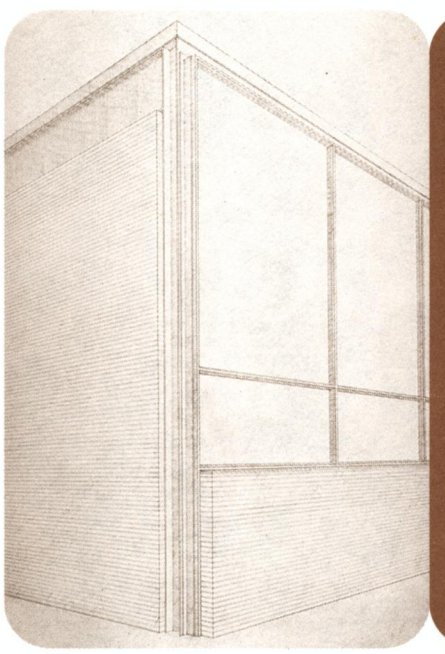

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fig. 1

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Illinois Institute of Technology, Library and Administration Building, 1944. Drawing: Williams and Meyers, Chicago. In Arthur Drexler, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (New York: Braziller, 1960), fig. 71.

1 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), 287. Slavoj Zizek's example is from his *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 120.

2 Richard Saul Wurman, ed., *What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 29. Unless noted otherwise, all Kahn quotations are from Wurman.

3 The brick example is from Wurman, 152; the train station example is from "Order Is" in Vincent Scully, *Louis I. Kahn* (New York: Braziller, 1962), 113.

4 Manfredo Tafuri, *Ricerca del Rinascimento: principi, città, architetti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), xxi (translation by Daniel Sherer forthcoming from Yale University Press, 1996).

5 Ernesto Laclau, "Introduction," in *The Making of Political Identities*, Laclau, ed. (New York: Verso, 1994), 1–5.

6 Laclau and Lilian Zac, "Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics" in *The Making of Political Identities*, 32. For a more extensive discussion of the question of identity and architecture, see my "Identity and the Discourse of Politics in Contemporary Architecture," *Assemblage* 27: 9-18.

7 Sigmund Freud, "Negation," in Freud, *Collected Papers*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1952), 5:184.

8 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed. (New York: Norton, 1988), 100.

destructuring effects. . . . This is why there is a permanent and alternating movement whereby the lack is rejected and invoked, articulated and annulled, included and excluded."[9] In some of the more engaging work of Kahn and his contemporaries, the new identities constructed simultaneously enact this oscillation between a desired identity, its failure, and a complex new identity that arises from this failure. Yet in other contemporary or later work of these same architects, these tectonic enactments of desire and doubt also fail, giving rise to new identities that result in more formulaic symbolizations and stylizations of these previously enacted tectonic tensions. It would be pointless, however, to lament these new identities as some form of failure or decline or degeneration – they are merely further attempts to develop stable identities. They too will fail, and their failures will lead to other attempts, other architectures, other histories, other criticisms, other theories. It would be equally pointless to suggest that these rarefied "high art" enactments or symbolizations are definitive expressions of some zeitgeist – they merely put into play certain tensions of their time. One could, and should, just as productively analyze the "commercial" architecture of a given time to see these tensions and complexities also at play, even if – some might suggest – in a less refined, more confused, and consequently more overt way. Let me give one such example of tension and confusion. When I was a student in architecture school, circa 1980, I was taken on one of those class field trips that one is always taken on in architecture school, a field trip to see the (then) new Levi's Plaza, this being the San Francisco corporate headquarters of Levi Strauss & Co. (the manufacturer of blue jeans and other fashionable attire) designed by Hellmuth, Obata, and Kassabaum (HOK), this being a building complex that represented the beginning stages of HOK's fashionable but belated move from their tepid late-modern phase into their tepid postmodern phase, the complex in question being done up with brick veneer, in order, it was claimed by HOK (or at least by the project designer who gave us the tour) to be "contextual," contextual, that is, in a neighborhood of masonry warehouses soon to be replaced by corporate headquarters aspiring to emulate the masonry warehouses that would no longer be there when they, the corporate headquarters, got done emulating and replacing them. Now this brick veneer had been applied to long horizontal precast concrete panels, and these concrete panels in turn had been hung so that the half-bricks of each panel were (and undoubtedly still are) separated from each other by an expansion joint of what in my memory seems like (at the very least) an inch and a half. When another student asked if this (at the very least) inch and a half didn't defeat the supposed affect of the brick, the response from the project designer at HOK – HOK being an architectural firm that at that time was surely among the five largest in the world – at that time, circa 1980, was: "We wanted to be true to the panels." That, as the expression goes, reminds me of a joke – a tectonic joke. It is the only tectonic joke I know. It is a joke, by the way, that I first heard in architecture school, circa 1980 – because, as it must be obvious by now, I am not a historian. It is a joke that finds its humor in the very desire and doubt of that Kahn morality tale that I mentioned earlier, that identity crisis of Kahn and of his brick, one of those discussions – one of many, as we know – that Kahn, it seems, liked to have with inanimate objects. Here is the joke. It goes like this: Louie Kahn asked a brick what it wanted to be, and it said: "Veneer." However cynical this joke might sound – and certainly it represents, among other things, the cynicism of students, already tired, that is, from all that has passed – it represents now, as it represented in Kahn's time, the real constructional condition of brick, at least in the United States: for the institutional buildings of the scale at which Kahn was building, it was not possible to use brick in a load-bearing capacity. In terms of the questions of identity and its failure, of desire and its doubt, it is no use mourning this condition, either with some manic mourning of the ubiquity of simulacra – "It's all veneer!" – or with some melancholic mourning for some lost past – "There was a time when a brick was a brick, when bricks bore the loads of our lives!" Partially because one of the originary uses of brick was as a facing material. And precisely because it is not necessary to choose between a seemingly "stable" identity as load-bearing or its "failure" as veneer. It is merely a range of conditions to examine, to explore, to investigate, to address, to play with – which Kahn did, both to greater and lesser effect. I said it was not possible to use brick in a load-bearing capacity, but what I should say is that it was not commercially practical, which, in most cases, certainly in all of Kahn's cases, amounts to the same thing. It was precisely this seeming failure, this doubt, circulating around this sort of identity – this identity of the material realm – in this particular historical period that triggered Kahn's very desire for this particular material: this material that he could evoke, in a historicist way, but never use – use, that is, in an unproblematic way. Because of need, because it was not practical, as Kahn himself, circa 1972, told Brick: "Arches are difficult to make, they cost more money, I think you can use concrete across your opening." The (expression of the) individual identity of that brick, or of that architect, has to come to terms with needs and desires and demands outside itself, has to come to terms, in other words, with its place in the collective identity: the concrete element is, as Kahn said, circa 1973, the "restraining member which keeps the arch from pushing out. It brings it back into the wall. I call it a composite order. I recognize in which way the concrete is helping brick to be used again. Brick has within it its own death, because it is not resourceful enough" (196). Kahn conceived this restraining and ordering of individual architectural identity as not unlike the restraining and ordering enacted by society itself, as, for example, when Kahn said, circa the same year, that "the plan is a society of rooms in whatever may be their duty and in what way they supplement the duty of others" (237). "You could build the entire idea of a society of man," Kahn said, circa 1968, "by just thinking of the brick structure which can be built" (49). Let's let this last statement stand as is (or as was), but with the slight addition of one phrase: "*and* cannot be built." Not *or*. I mean, both the brick structure – or any other material(ist) identity – that can *and* cannot be built in any historical period, *as well as* the "entire idea" of a society that can *and* cannot be built in any historical period. Even the phrase *historical period* leads to the problem of identity and its so-called stability or instability. Or, as it is often stated in the terms of a certain sort of art history: stable period following instable period, instable following stable. Yet it should be common knowledge by now that one can find instabilities in what appears to be stable (the very seeds of its so-called degeneration) and stabilities, or attempts at stabilities, in what appears to be unstable. For example, it is often

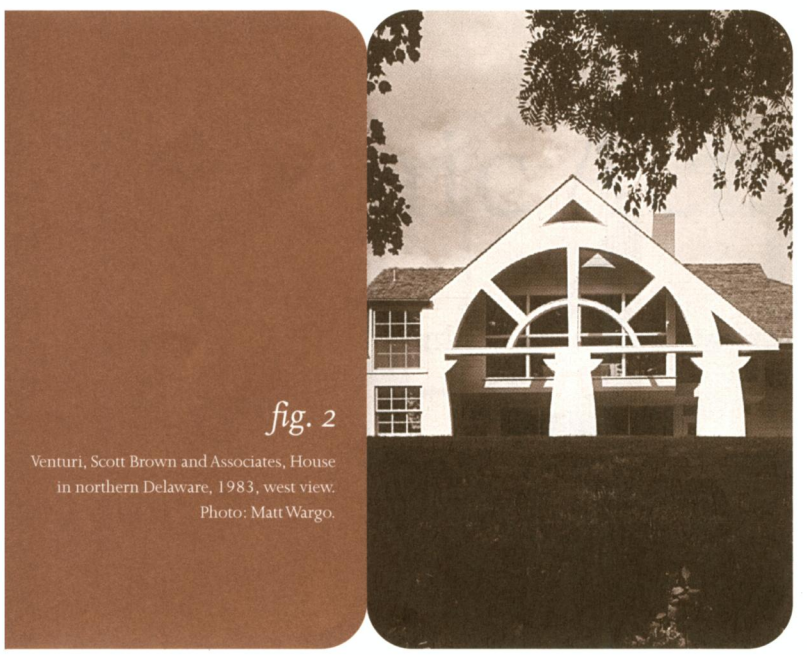

fig. 2

Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, House in northern Delaware, 1983, west view. Photo: Matt Wargo.

assumed that postmodernism established itself as a definitive break from modernism by proposing identities and concerns that were completely absent from that earlier period. But the identities that postmodernism in architecture would claim for itself – contextualism, historicism, fragmentation – are already latent within modernism, as becomes most evident in the period following World War II. In the United States, for example, there was a sense of new possibility and progress – including the new possibilities, and new forms of global empire, that would manifest themselves through expansionism and imperialism – as well as a sense of restriction, through the social and cultural xenophobias of McCarthyism and Cold War (identity) politics. In architecture these tensions circulated around fears of collectivism with its totalitarian overtones and fears that individual caprice would destroy common values and traditions – thus the back and forth swing one sees between identifications with collective contextualism and identifications with individual expressionism (a single architect, for example, who covers this range: Eero Saarinen). These tensions and many others were expressed architecturally from the level of urban design to that of tectonic detail. The "emergence" of postmodernism in architecture occurred when these tensions no longer seemed much like tensions, when they seemed to reflect little more than the arbitrariness of any stylistic choice. Yet this postmodern identification with the failure, with the arbitrariness, of any stable design identification will, in its turn, fail, as we are now witnessing, as new "stable" identities are being sought, or rather, are being constructed, before our eyes. Here is an example, one out of many possible examples: the current focus in contemporary practice on tectonics as a form of comforting stability: (precious) tectonic details as *ends* in and of themselves, rather than as a *means* of critical thought. Details without doubt. Tectonics (and Craft and Material) as Truth. But first, let's go back and locate some past desire and doubt in tectonic detail in the hopes of illuminating the present situation. Let's go back, circa 1944, say . . . to the ambivalence of the "Miesian corner," which appears most dramatically in the discontinuous surfaces of Mies van der Rohe's project for the Illinois Institute of Technology Library and Administration Building around the end of the war (*fig. 1*). Here one finds a wavering between a destruction and an intensification of the corner, of the *identity* of the corner. While prior examples of modernist glass corners had already begun to problematize the corner by allowing non-load-bearing material to occupy the corner, those examples still maintained the continuous wrapping condition of the facade. But Mies, in extending this break the vertical length of the building – in those tripled corners, those quavering corners, say at the IIT Alumni Building (1945) or at 900–910 Lakeshore Drive (1953–56) or at the Seagram Building (1954–58) – unhinged each facade in a way that is at least as, if not more, disruptive than the veneered effect of those contemporaneously nonstructural I-beams welded to the surface of Mies's buildings. Once freed, these facades would develop into the detached walls and screens not only of Kahn but also of Edward Durrell Stone and, eventually, of Charles Moore and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. While the form from Mies to Venturi and Scott Brown changes significantly, the underlying ambivalence of identity changes only in character – from the *sotto voce* disquiet of the former to the billboard cynicism and irony of the latter (*fig. 2*). Veneer again, you see. Because, of course, the wall in its modernist (non-load-bearing, free-facade, free-plan) condition inevitably becomes so free that the architect finds it difficult (as facing, as surface, as veneer) to keep the wall – in the "phenomenon of its splitting" (Lacan again), its splitting of need and demand – from floating free of the building. But – and this is an important but – notice that through their walls and screens Moore and Venturi and Scott Brown attempt to demonstrate and manifest the failure of one aspect of modernism's program of abstraction (in other words, modernism's own attempt to manifest the failure of traditional identity), yet these architects do not entirely return these walls and screens to their traditional (classical and vernacular) referents – they still abstract these referents. Not as totally as Peter Eisenman would *attempt* to abstract these referents and of course, equally, by necessity, would fail – Eisenman still referencing his walls and screens to the traditional structural frame. Both sides, in other words, are unable either to align themselves completely with or to remove themselves completely from their traditional identities. Thus, while the postwar period may be characterized as almost-but-not-quite beyond (modernist) belief, the postmodern period might be characterized as beyond-and-thus-almost-but-not-quite back to (traditional) belief. Here again one might say that, circa 1945, it was Mies's turn toward – desire toward – the classical and the symmetrical that caused the doubt that materialized in the disruption of the corner, a doubt that obviously was not desired in his earlier asymmetrical modernism that maintained the corner. Or vice versa. Maybe having materialized, maybe having made tectonic, his doubt at (and of) the corner, Mies felt the desire to contain the violence of this rupture through the obvious, "time-honored" means of classical symmetry. Thankfully we know that these questions of origins, these questions of the originary design moment, cannot and will not be resolved. And need not be: Mies's corner, as I stated earlier, both destroys and intensifies the identity of the corner. This leads us back to Kahn, to Kahn's identity crises, as he oscillates between seeking historicist stabilities (the symbols of the arch, the circle, the brick, the room, the assembly of rooms), only to manifest the inability of any of these stabilities to stabilize in a definitive manner. Thus, the Richards Laboratory, 1957–65: where the simple, additive, rectilinear organization is further articulated by the horizontal and vertical particularizations of the precast structural frame, the fenestration, the stair and exhaust towers, the offices and the laboratory bays, and in addition where the thinness of the brick veneer is made visible at the tops of the concrete stair towers and in the rift in the corners of the Biology Building tower. Or the Salk Institute, 1959–65: where the programmatic division of labor creates an architectural division, where the condition of the study, in Kahn's words, circa 1960, "the architecture of the oak table and the rug," is seen as exceeding, as being unable to be held in, by the laboratory space, "the architecture of air cleanliness and area adjustability,"[10] creating a rift between the study towers and the laboratory that must be bridged, and in addition where the wood infill in the study towers does not quite fill in the concrete frame, creating a rift that must be glazed, and where even the view of this prime real estate causes an exceeding of the axial space of the study. Or the Dominican Motherhouse of St. Catherine de Ricci, 1965–69: where the individually regularized blocks of the refectory, school, chapel, and entrance are "haphazardly" skewed. Or the Exeter library, 1965–72: where the traditionally regular facade, a 17-foot-deep brick "veneer" wraps around the structural concrete core, yet another of Kahn's ruins wrapping around a building – rift at its corners, frameless/voided openings along its top (*fig. 3*).

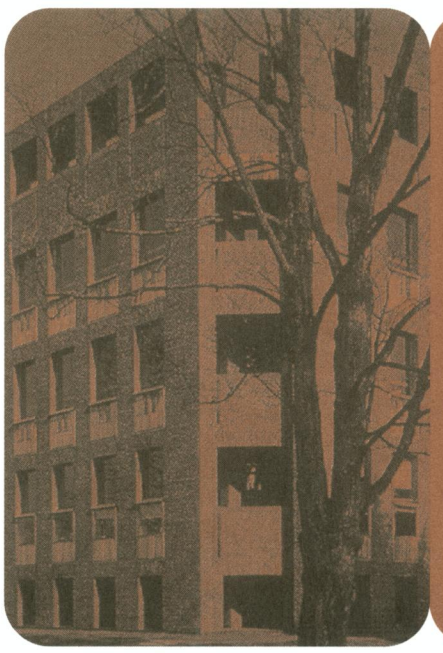

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fig. 3

3. 8. Library, Phillips Exeter Academy. Photo: © 1977 Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

9 Laclau and Zac, "Minding the Gap," 33.

10 "Form and Design" from Scully, *Louis I. Kahn*, 119–200.

Or the Kimbell Art Museum, 1966–72: where the difference between the cycloid shell and the infill walls, between, that is, the Roman ideal and the *stressing* (in both senses of this term: the emphasis *and* the deformation) of this classical ideal, creates a rift that must be glazed. It might even be said that Kahn's process is homologous to the very tectonic and structural acts of the structural system of so many of his buildings. I am referring to his use of *prestressed* and *post-tensioned* – two words that seem to work well here – concrete: a structural and constructional system in which the possibility of deformation is allowed to materialize in order to *attempt* to control this deformation in and through the process of its tectonic construction. While this structural deformation is often concealed at the end of the construction process yet "remembered" in and by the structural system, the deformation of Kahn's idealized, prestressed conceptual structure is often "remembered" and not only allowed to remain in view, but is manneristically accentuated. "The internal life of the structure," Kahn said, circa 1972, "is one in which the strains are held in check" (181). In this desire Kahn shares with medieval morality plays something more than merely his use of "personified abstractions":[11] Kahn's characters – Brick and Order and School and Silence and Light – to the morality play's characters – Everyman and Goods and Discretion and Mischief and Death. According to literary critic Jonathan Dollimore, the traditional morality play also allows strains to be revealed, only to keep them in check: "The formal coherence of the morality play reflected the coherence of the metaphysical doctrine which was its principal subject. Disorder and suffering are finally rendered meaningful through faith in, and experience of, a providential order. . . . The best morality plays are anything but flatly didactic: they confront, experientially, some of the deepest religious paradoxes. Nevertheless they are paradoxes that are articulated through, and contained by, the same formal pattern: human kind exists in the shadow of original sin; we fall, suffer, and eventually repent; there is usually a relapse, incurring despair, before a secure recovery to redemption." Dollimore goes on to demonstrate that this desire for resolution, for stability, in the morality plays will fail, and thus lead to later Jacobean tragedy, in which "[c]oherence comes to reside in the sharpness of definition given to metaphysical and social dislocation, not in the aesthetic, religious or didactic resolution of it. . . . [C]ontradictory accounts of experience are forced into 'misalignment,' the tension which this generates being a way of getting us to confront the problematic and contradictory nature of society itself."[12] But, for Kahn, as for the morality play, strains may be revealed, but they should not be contradictory. "Order," Kahn said, circa 1955, "supports integration."[13] At least this was what Kahn attempted, even if what resulted is a sometimes contradictory programmatic and tectonic play of desire and doubt in Kahn's institutions: "It is an indication of the tentative nature of things, the question of the institution," Kahn said, circa 1968 (certainly a year for the questioning of institutions): "The questioning of the institutions will bring about a much purer translation of our institutions, and even bring about those we yet can't see or feel" (21). Questioning of institutions, yes, for innovation even, but mostly for purification, for integration, for wholeness. Kahn's desire for the latter is so strong that even in his "poem" to Carlo Scarpa, Kahn felt compelled to keep the potential strain of Scarpa's separate elements in check, insisting on "the wholeness of inseparable elements" that "manifest the wholeness of 'Form'" (324). Both Kahn's architecture and his writing circulate around this struggle, around this sense of strain and of resolution, of possibility and of loss, of innovation and of nostalgia, of particularization and of (monumentalized) unity, of letting the institution "become what it wants to be" and that becoming always lacking or in excess. Lack and excess: "I thought of the beauty of ruins," Kahn said, circa 1961, "the absence of frames . . . of things which nothing lives behind . . . and so I thought of wrapping ruins around buildings."[14] The building is not sufficient *in*, as the expression goes, and *of* itself. The doubt of this insufficiency triggers the desire for the supplement of the building within the building, or perhaps one should say the building without the building – in the sense of its symbolic function being beyond, outside of, in the lack of, in the excess of, its use function. "A building built," Kahn said, circa 1963, "is in bondage of use. . . . Isn't it true that a building being built is of more interest than one that is finished? A building that has become a ruin is again free from the bondage of use."[15] Free from the bondage of use: oh, how convenient that would be for a historical period desiring to evoke history without evoking its bondages, desiring, that is, a new identity out of that failure of modernism to free itself of historical identity. It sounds like such a wonderful dream, this freedom from the bondage of use, like so much of Kahn's dreamy talks and writings and interviews – the great mass of it all now collected in those weighty volumes, which are quoted, reverentially, time and again, by historians and critics and theorists, without any, or with very little, critical reflection or contextualization or historicization – but of course it is a dream, and if there is any modification to be attempted on this bondage, then that modification would have to be enacted from within that bondage, rather than symbolized from without. This is why, with rare exceptions, this additive supplement from without – in contrst to an attempt to find and address the supplement (the lack or excess) within – almost always becomes the occasion for diagrammatic symbolic abstraction, for screens and ruins. Screens and ruins. Or to use Kahn's words, circa 1973, in reference to his attempt at "sun" control in Africa, shield: "In the Luanda project, I wanted to make the shield out of paper, though concrete was the more logical material. . . . I wanted to express the fact that the concrete was not asked to do any work, that it was able to stand up like a piece of paper when you bend it" (232). Something that would have the kind of "architectural identity" (197), to use Kahn's phrase, circa the same year, lacking in the screens and *brise-soleils* of Edward Durrell Stone and all of those other embassy architects. Kahn wanted to close in, to make architectural, what he considered to be the ephemeral quality, but not the condition itself, of the screen. Perhaps it is not surprising then, and even most appropriate, that the first instance for this shielding function, the United States Consulate in Luanda, Angola, 1959–62, falls just within the end of what has been called the "heyday," 1954–60, of the U.S. Embassy-Building Program. "Better embassies mean better

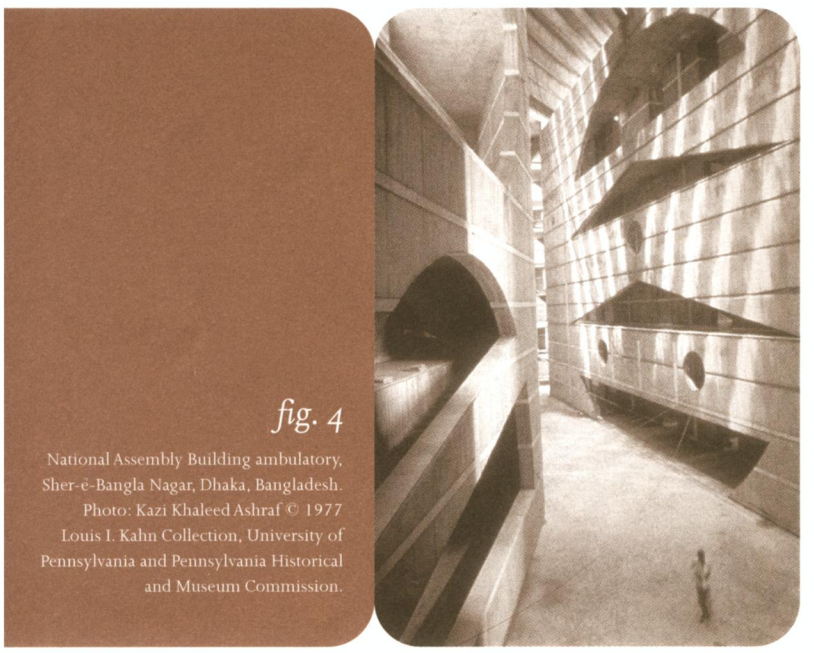

fig. 4

National Assembly Building ambulatory, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo: Kazi Khaleed Ashraf © 1977 Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

business" is how one interest group, the American Embassy Association, put it.[16] Succinctly. From screen to shield, protecting whatever was deemed to need protection, whether the U.S. Consulate in Luanda; the India Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India (modeled on the Harvard Business School); or Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, the official capital of Bangladesh. But all of Kahn's shields had holes: symbolic cutouts of pure geometric figures. And when a singular set of geometric figures and identities will not stabilize, the figures and identities multiply: what starts in Dhaka as a careful, albeit formalistic play of variations in the brick hostels (various filling ins and emptyings of the circle motif), ends up in the concrete National Assembly Building as an arbitrary pile-up of cutout shapes, an erratic game of mix 'n match, a desperate attempt at symbolic evocation in the face of the failure of evocation (*fig. 4*). In the face of failure, in the facing of the facade: because now, at Dhaka, unlike its earlier role as restraining member in the "composite order of brick and concrete," there is nothing to restrain the concrete – in what Kahn once again called a composite order – as those inconsequential lines of marble, mere cover-ups of the concrete pour joints that bear no relation to those cutouts, make so evident. While some critical work is beginning to emerge within the field of art history regarding the exportation of U.S. ideology through the visual arts in the postwar period,[17] much needs to be said in relation to architecture beyond the necessary but obvious examples of embassies, as this exportation included, among other things, such vehicles as the broadcasts of talks by prominent architects on the official propaganda airwaves of the Voice of America, prominent architects, that is, like Louis Kahn, whose talk "Form and Design" was broadcast, circa 1960.[18] As it happens, Tafuri is one of the few historians to comment on what he called the "exportable" identity of Kahn's architecture: "Kahn's architecture proved highly exportable. Pushed aside in the United States, he found that his celebrative approach was highly pertinent to the developing countries. Like another great interpreter of American institutions, Daniel Hudson Burnham, Kahn likewise was to see his own mythic imperial symbols realized outside the United States, as consolation prizes magnanimously handed out by American civilization to countries over which it has designs for expansion."[19] So it should not be too surprising that Kahn's most diagrammatic work might appear in a third world country, and in this regard Kahn's remarks, delivered in India, might reveal some additional information about the symbolic meaning of one of his favorite diagrammatic symbols, the circle. When a student at the Indian Institute of Management, in reference in the circular openings in the building's "porches," asked Kahn, "What are the holes for?" the response from Kahn – Kahn being an architect who at that time was surely among the five most prominent in the world – at that time, circa 1974, was: "To make accurate spitting possible" (252). However cynical this response might sound – and certainly it represents, among other things, the cynicism of architects, in this case an architect just days away from his death by heart attack in Penn Station, returning as he was to Philadelphia from India, tired, that is, from all that had passed – it represents now, as it represented in Kahn's time, the real constructional condition of symbols, which is that it is not possible to construct or to use (old or new) symbols in a load-bearing capacity – they will not bear the load of a definitive identity, as even the most seemingly stable Big Symbols, say, the Cross, have undergone structural failures, identity crises, Reformations, and Counter-Reformations. One seeks out a symbol for assurance, for stability, the stability of timelessness, the stability of self-evidency. But then there always comes that kind of question, that kind of "What are the holes for?" kind of question: "His [Kahn's] architectural works are intent on bringing back a collective memory. In this Kahn has revealed himself to be profoundly American, expressing the never-satisfied need to equip himself with secure historical points of reference. It is an old traditional need of Americans to recognize themselves as a people in symbols that resist the wear and change of history. But the process can only be tautological: the new bases for architecture set up by Kahn are every bit as artificial as the myths and institutions in which he put his trust."[20] One of the innumerable myths that circulates around Kahn is that he is supposed to have resurrected some comforting archaic depth of presence, yet what surfaces in this process of resurrection is the disquiet of surface, the surface, that is, of symbol – which perhaps suggests some further linkages and relations between Kahn and Venturi and Scott Brown. My point here is not to simplify the complex sensitivities and insensitivities of Kahn in the third world, but merely to state that the diagrammatic crudeness of some of his third-world symbolisms exposes certain diagrammatic and crude symbolizings that reappear in his work in the United States. This is, in part, the problem of veneer, the problem of the institutional, physical, political, and social tectonics of veneer, beyond the crudeness (but not just in the technical sense) of, say, the slate facade panels of the Erdman Dormitory. Let me then compare one of Kahn's cruder symbolizations with one of his more sophisticated enactments, as they appear simultaneously in his library at the Phillips Exeter Academy. The latter occurs at the exterior walls, those traditionally regularized and veneered outer walls that, as I already mentioned, rift at the corners. What I want to talk about is the interior condition of these exterior walls, or rather, the relations between their interior and exterior conditions, as exemplified in the relations between the study carrel and the wall (*fig. 5*). "The carrel," Kahn said, circa 1972, "is the room within a room" (180). But here at Exeter what is particularly interesting is the relationship between this room-within-a-room and the wall. First, the carrel and window are not separate elements: the casework of the window is transformed into the casework of the carrel. Or, if you prefer, vice versa. Second, the condition of the carrel has caused a rift in the window, and thus there becomes the "individual" window for the study carrel and the "collective" window for the general reading area. Third, this individual window (and thus the interior of the carrel) is pushed out toward the exterior, while the collective window is pushed in toward the interior. Fourth, the individual carrel is not for a single individual – "The windows should be made particular to suit a student who wants to be alone even when he is with others"[21] – the individual is already with others, or at least another, as the carrel is for a pair of individuals.

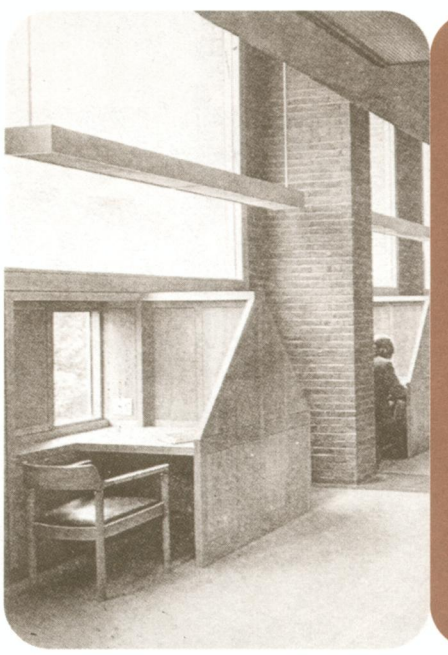

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fig. 5

Library, Phillips Exeter Academy, study carrels. Photo: © 1977 Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

11 David Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Stuart England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 792.

12 Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke Univeristy Press, 1989), 38–39.

13 Scully, *Louis I. Kahn*, 114.

14 Quoted in David B. Brownlee and David G. DeLong, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 70.

15 "Remarks," *Perspecta* 9/10 (1965), 330.

16 Jane C. Loeffler, "The Architecture of Diplomacy: Heyday of the United States Embassy-Building Program, 1954–1960," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 49 (September 1990), 252.

17 See, for example, Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) and Alan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs" in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin, eds., *Modernism and Modernity* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 121–59.

18 Scully, *Louis I. Kahn*, 71.

19 Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (New York: Abrams: 1979), 407.

20 Ibid., 403.

Thus, the contingency of the carrel and the window is worked and worked until an accumulation of metonymic relations circulating between and within them – inside/outside, subject/object, use/structure, private/public, individual/collective, body/architecture, wall/room, surface (window-wall)/volume (carrel) – are drawn forth, and most importantly, shown, enacted, as already enfolded. What results is the development of a complex tectonic articulation and figuration – a topological unfolding of social, psychological, and material surfaces – not merely the simple addition of the two original figures: window and carrel. Kahn goes on to vary this figuration slightly from floor to floor, but in a vertical hierarchy complicit with his ideological notions of social and metaphysical hierarchy: "The windows are larger at the top and smaller at the bottom," he said, circa 1972. "They form a graduation of forces that come down with little force, where the forces are dancing like angels, to the bottom, where they are grunting" (178). This is the idea of hierarchy one might expect at a college preparatory school – the angels at the top, the grunts at the bottom – and then, as one might expect from Kahn post-Richards Laboratory, this figuration is regularized and repeated floor by floor rather than allowing for individual and idiosyncratic differences within or between floors. Whatever strains were allowed to be revealed are thus held in check. This complex tectonic articulation is in extreme contrast with the simplistic relation between the circular cutouts – "To make accurate spitting possible"? (*fig. 6*) – in the concrete wall of the central space (itself as empty and emptied out as the circle) and the barrier of this opening, which thankfully is not just a railing, but at least maintains some of the library theme by being a bookcase and display area, which is more than can be said for the Dhaka cutouts. But there is hardly any struggle at Exeter between these two bondages of use (structural bracing and barrier case), almost no tectonic articulations, almost no (subtle and detailed) workings of the metonymic contingencies: just cut and fill. Here is one way to analyze tectonic articulation: Does the presence or absence of any given architectural element conceptually and structurally affect any other given element? Does, in other words, one element *respond* to or *affect* a response from any contingent element? For the central space of the Exeter library, the wall remains unaffected by the presence of the barrier/case – whereas the exterior wall of the library is conceptually and structurally affected by the presence of the carrel, although only at the level of infill (all greater strains to the structural frame are held in check). The circle of the central space is just a leftover from earlier design schemes, a leftover from the earlier time when Kahn desired the building to be composed of brick arches but before the time of the doubts of limited building budgets and building committees (*fig. 7*). It must be emphasized that these conditions, the cutout on the one hand and the wall/carrel on the other, indicate two radically different ways of working, and their differences mark the poles of Kahn's operation – although the latter occurs rarely in Kahn's work. Is it not interesting that in the very same building there are moments of simplistic, even bombastic, symbolism *as well as* moments in which simple means are used to develop subtle, complex enactments? There is no point in attempting to synthesize *this* confusion of the architect. Why allow each aspect of the building its own free and easy rationale without regard for the tension between aspects? While this is surely the way most architects design (and write), why should this be the way of the historian or critic or theorist? Why be the architect's agent? Why not use the terms of one aspect of the work to push against, to illuminate the potentials and limits of some other aspect of the building? Why not examine the convergences and divergences – the range of the affiliations – of the various aspects of a work? But what is wrong, you might well ask, with synthesizing this pairing of the cutout and the wall/carrel? Is it not, to use Tafuri's formulation, the utopian *sphere* of idealized geometries and the worldly *labyrinth* of compromised contingencies? Well, if Kahn was aware of the radical disjunction of this pairing, he did not, at Exeter, directly enact this disjunction (as, say, Giovanni Battista Piranesi did by abruptly stopping the iconographic imagery on the back of the altar in Santa Maria del Priorato – an enactment of the radical disjunction of the object to itself).[22] These two aspects at Exeter Library are not constructed in a manner that directly addresses their relations, either their radical disjunction or their continuity or their reversals or their mediation of the difference of each identity. My point about the radical disjunction of these operations is this: there is a difference, a tectonic difference, between an identity *symbolized* through abstract means and an identity whose symbolism is being *enacted* through tectonic means. This difference is the difference between metaphor and metonymy: metaphor as a form of substitution (a form of importation) from some other place, and metonymy as a form of association based not on some other place but on the very place (or some aspect of the place, or what is contiguous to the place) of the object in question.[23] Kahn's circle at Exeter is an imported metaphor for, as Kahn says, circa 1972, "a connecting architecture," a substitute metaphor for what he desired that central and empty space to be: "a free, unobligating room" (180–81). Free from obligations – oh, that dreamy talk again: how convenient that would be for a historical period desiring to evoke some idealized history of room typologies without evoking their obligations. But this central space does not enact any direct sense of connection other than the questionably obvious connection of the stereotypical atrium space. It does not enact any direct sense of connection precisely because it attempts to be free and unobligating, free, that is, from the bondages of its obligating uses: the uses of the reference desk, the uses of the circulation desk, the uses of the card file (now, of course, in the form of the computer). The attempt to empty this central space, in other words, is not radical enough to affect (or to make an architectural opportunity of) these institutional obligations. Whereas the wall and the study carrel at Exeter – which could be, and often are in most libraries, nothing more than just an unconnected collection of carrel, window, and wall – tectonically enacts a sense of connection and interrelation by virtue of the metonymic relations of their *interrelated obligating uses* being first conceived of, and then drawn out, in, and through the architecture. Christian Metz's observations regarding contiguity and metonymy in film can be extended here to architecture: that one element may have proximity to another element does not necessarily guarantee – generate, develop, enact – a metonymic effect.[24] There are plenty of study carrels next to plenty of windows in plenty of libraries, but that does not mean that their metonymic relations have been addressed or operated on in the architecture of those libraries, those windows, those carrels. Metaphor in architecture thus emerges as a form of doubt or a form of fear of the object, the doubt or fear of materialist identity, the fear that the object does not have sufficient meaning *in* and *around* itself. Which is

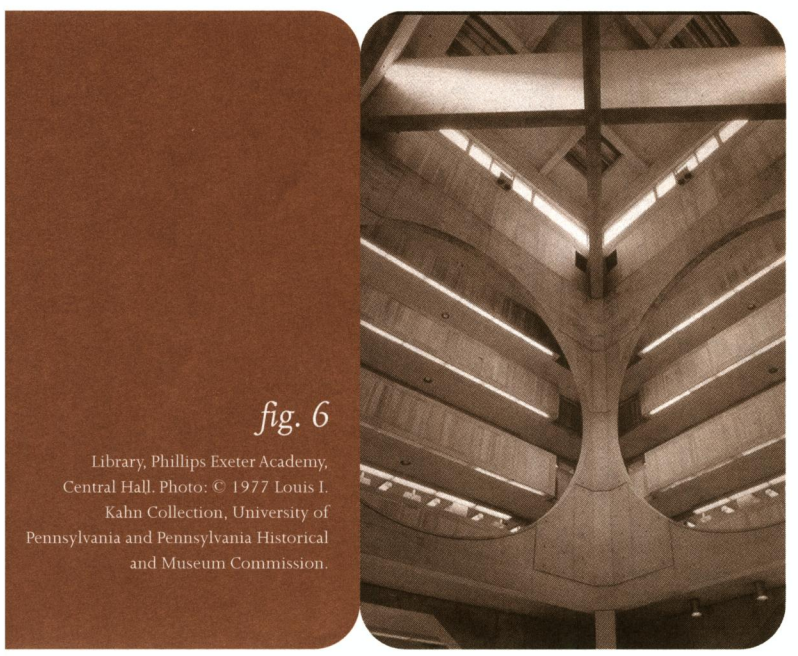

fig. 6

Library, Phillips Exeter Academy, Central Hall. Photo: © 1977 Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

21 Brownlee and DeLong, *Louis I. Kahn*, 129.

22 Manfredo *Tafuri, The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 48–49.

23 When I say metonymy, I am referring to forms of contingent displacements that draw out (metaphorical) meaning, and not to the simple substitution of part for whole, container for contained, that more properly belongs to that sub-division of metonymy known as synecdoche.

24 As quoted in Constance Penley, "Introduction to 'Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent,'" *Camera Obscura* 7 (1981): 7.

why the mannerist architects of recent time, say James Stirling or Venturi and Scott Brown, have been more concerned with diagrammatic architectural symbols than with tectonic enactments. The architect's doubt of the material realm causes the architect not to take seriously the construction of the building as a site of doubt, as a site where one could find that doubt within, rather than in spite of, the tectonics of the object. The failure of the cynical postmodern architectural identity (of the cutout column or the thin historicist quote) has led to its seeming opposite: the romanticism for a truthful and stable tectonic identity that has resulted in a fetishization of materials and details, which, in the end, is just another way of avoiding materialist identity, precisely by substituting the use of fetishized high or low materials for the very questioning of material identity, precisely by substituting the use of fetishized constructional details for the very questioning of the social artifice of material construction. Every event, as constructed through an architecture, is already its own representation. So then one might reveal it as such, construct it as such, in the gesture of its gesture, in the construct of its gesture, in the contingency and oscillation of identity and its failure. The same might be said of the tectonics of historiographic or critical or theoretical events, as they are constructed through oral or written presentations in, just to give an example or two, annual meetings and their publication in journals. Speaking again of identity and its failure, it is necessary to say that Kahn, of course, is not important *in and of himself*, which is why I should relate Kahn's tectonic acts of desire and doubt to the tectonic acts of desire and doubt of some other architects of his time – which I will attempt on some other occasion – architects such as Luigi Moretti and Carlo Scarpa, in order to develop a certain tension: not a dualistic or a dialectical tension, but a triadic tension. Why these three architects? (I could easily have picked three others.) Because of the present, of course, because of (the identities of) certain contemporary architectural practices, certain practices that reference the look of Kahn, Moretti, and Scarpa without working their critical capabilities: certain precious craftisms that could be referred to as neo-Scarpisms, certain disjunctive formalisms that could be referred to as neo-Morettisms, certain normalizing institutionalisms that could be referred to as neo-Kahnisms. It is pointless to lament these new identities as failures, as degenerations of some previous masters, as I am trying to demonstrate here that the seeds of these degenerations, as always, may be found in the so-called masters themselves, when they become self-satisfied in their own internalized expressions. Like Brick, the architect who does not engage (internally) in relation to the externalized collective order, and vice versa, "has within," to use Kahn's words, her or his "own death." So let me end here, with this question: What do you want Kahn to be? Because, every historian, critic, theorist, or architect who attempts to work on, or think through, Kahn and his architecture and his writing, will repeat the same process of ventriloquism: they – we – will all ask of Kahn, as Kahn did of Brick, what Kahn wants to be. And Scully's Kahn, Tafuri's Kahn, Frampton's Kahn, your Kahn, my Kahn will not give the same answers. How could they? But neither will each of these Kahns give entirely different answers. How could they? Leaving us, then, all of us, neither with the total failure and indeterminacy of no identity for Kahn, nor with some stable and objective identity of the true Kahn, but with our own (morality) tales, our own disturbances and shorings up of the present, our own discussions with the inanimate "facts" of the past – with all of their identities and failures of identities – that we, like Kahn with his brick, must animate, must piece together in the tectonics of disciplinary research and presentation and representation, in our own constructed acts of desire and doubt.

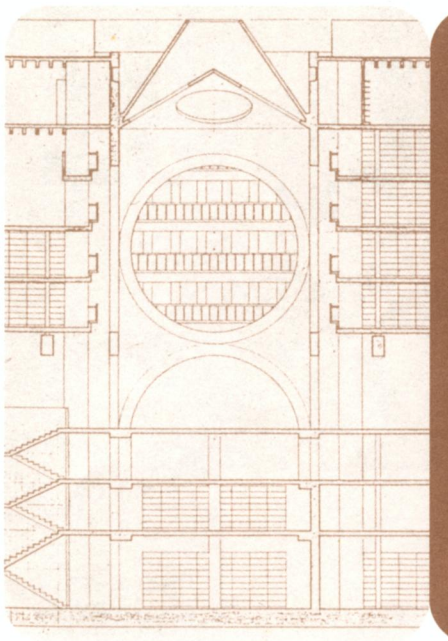

fig. 7

Library, Phillips Exeter Academy, section, facing east. Drawing: © 1977 Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

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