

Louis Kahn: The Social Activist

Louis Kahn is regarded as one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century. This essay will identify how his social agenda developed during a testing period of history following World War II. Firstly it will concentrate on the earlier, less well known, period of his career; analysing his work on public housing projects and his written literature. Secondly it will look at how his earliest principles carried through to what is regarded as the mature stages of his career, by analysing two buildings, the First Unitarian Church, Rochester, and the National Assembly Complex, Dhaka.

In the earlier stages of his career Kahn worked as a chief designer on government funded social housing schemes within a partnership with Oskar Stonorov and George Howe. Through this work he developed a sympathetic relationship with communitarian ideologies, believing that an inspirational form of architecture was required to encourage social responsibility and create a civic purpose. These earlier projects tend to be disregarded when discussing Kahn's career, but it is this period that moulded Kahn's theories and underlying socialist agenda. His essay entitled '*Standards versus Essential Space: Comments on unit plans for war housing*' shows the depth of Kahn's thinking into the subject of affordable housing and the value he placed on the standard of living these would provide. For example, within this text he criticises the lack of storage and 'untidy work space' of government funded schemes and private projects. Despite, in private schemes, storage, 'untidy work space' and boiler were integrated into a basement, they were still not practical. They were often dark, poorly ventilated and impractical for moving washin and other work to and from, as well as creating drainage complexities which increased price. Kahn proposed simply to move the basement up to ground floor level to reduce costs and create a higher quality of space (Kahn, 1942). At this time the Great Depression, a severe worldwide economic downturn, hit America and in response The New Deal was initiated. This included a series of economic programs designed to provide relief for those worst hit, recover the economy and reform the financial system to prevent future repetition. This was a period where extensive social welfare programs were brought in, which greatly affected Kahn. (Frampton, 2007)

This early stage of his career, spent working on social projects, instilled in Kahn a belief that architecture can support and encourage communal identification to change society for the better. This was the basis of the monumental nature of his later works. In his essay '*Monumentality*' he approaches the concept and poetically describes it as being "a spiritual quality inherent in structure which conveys a feeling of eternity." (Kahn, 1944) For Kahn, this was a key aspect of a style of architecture that would reinforce the social program behind his designs.

At this point it is important to recognise his background. Coming from a poor Jewish family that immigrated to America when he was young, it is understandable how Kahn would begin to adopt a socio-political outlook. Growing up in the immigrant ghettos of Philadelphia, Kahn was part of a close knit community that he recalls as a friendly place where his father



1. Carvers Court Residential Complex, Coatesville, Pennsylvania (1944)

owned, what he described, as a financially successful shop where if a customer yearned for an item his father would give it away for free. (Goldhagen, 2001) This was, to Kahn at least, the primary ground for a harmonious utopian society, a communal environment that he wished to expand upon.

In this period of his career Kahn was very politically active. Inspired by the work and background of his colleague at the time Oskar Stonorov, he joined a series of activist groups in the early 40s. These included Philadelphia's Citizen's Council on City Planning and the American Society of Planners and Architects (similar to CIAM). (Goldhagen, 2001) Stonorov, Kahn and Howe designed Carvers Court, Coatesville, Pennsylvania¹, around this time and this was one of their first attempts at instilling their communal ethos into a neighbourhood. Built on a former racetrack, it was a 100 unit development that followed the oval of the original site configuration. The dwellings were close knitted into a single neighbourhood to "reinforce the communal aspects of the complex while de-emphasizing privacy and individual identity." (Goldhagen, 2001) Frampton brands this complex "inexplicably ungainly" comparing it to the more success work Kahn had previously carried out while working under Alfred Kastner on the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey², the idea of Ukrainian immigrant Benjamin Brown. (Frampton, 2007) The Jersey Homesteads were built for the relocation of Jewish garment works to a large scale farming and manufacturing farmland unit to escape from a densely populated city. The community still exists and is now recognised as its own township with low crime and strong self-sustaining community, an idealised society that Kahn had envisioned from his childhood. (Shapiro, 2008) At Carver Court Kahn, Stonorov and Howe used the composition Kahn suggests in his essay '*Monumentality*', as mentioned above, by locating main living space above a ground level garage. Both designs were designed to act as a neighbourhood commune and encourage citizens to have an active and vocal role within their community. (Goldhagen, 2001) This was an attempt by Kahn to give a civil responsibility to the people by creating local planning commission similar to ones he joined in Philadelphia.

It is Kahn's and Sonorov's design for hotel 194X that demonstrated Kahn's possibility to not only move beyond social housing schemes, but to also use monumentality as a community's symbolic importance over any capitalist intentions. The hotel

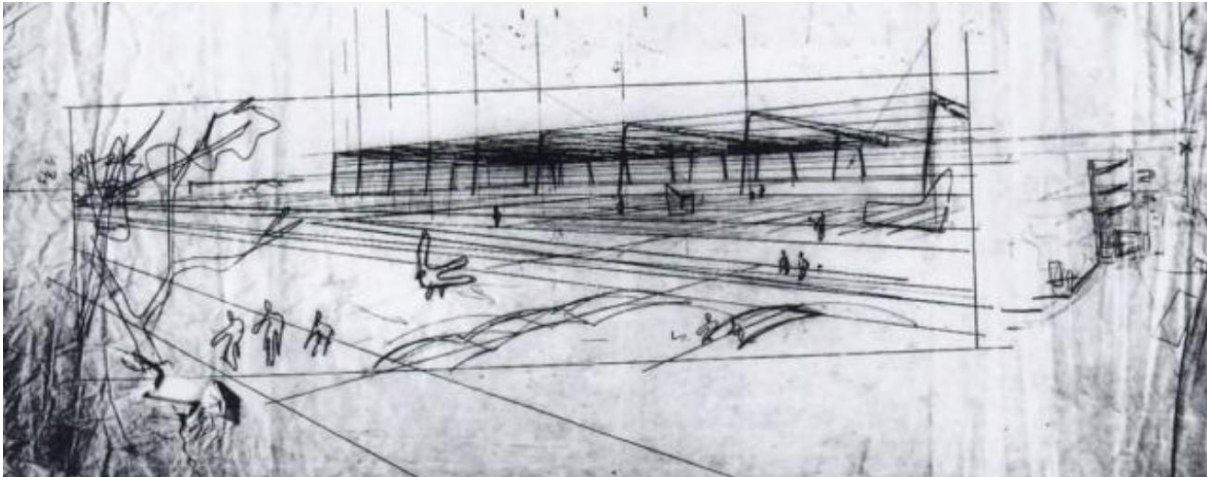


2. New Jersey Homesteads (1936)

was part of a design competition run by Architecture Forum magazine. In this plan Stonorov and Kahn use the premise of a hotel as a means to advertise the city and a civic expression for community enterprise. It was proposed that a single isolated monumental tower be used to house the hotel rooms, encouraging interaction between guests, so that being highly visible, it would be remembered symbolically. (Kahn & Stonorov, 1943) Here we see Kahn beginning to think independently about the potential of the relationship between monumentality and community. This is a theme that runs throughout his career as he moves away from social housing to civic institutions.

However architects and theoreticians were struggling with a means of creating a type of monumentality using a developing modern approach (functional, minimalist and rational). Following the end of the war there was a growing demand for memorials to fallen soldiers, a demand that some felt could not be met by modern means. Lewis Mumford, a writer Kahn was deeply sympathetic to, even wrote "if it is a monument it is not modern; if it is modern it cannot be a monument." (Mumford, 1996) The discussion of a new monumentality revolved around what type of monumentality to use; static war memorials or, as had been the trend following World War I, 'living memorial', institutions for which the soldiers had fought for. These debates continued in the *Architectural Review* with a symposium entitled '*In Search for a New Monumentality*' with contributions from the likes of Sigfried Giedion, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Walter Gropius. (Hitchcock, et al., 1948) Kahn, primarily known for his social housing schemes at the time, contributed to the debate by rejecting that modern society was not capable of producing monumental architecture and supporting the call for living, social monuments or institutions such as schools and community centres. He argued these were precursors for a new civilisation based on his social beliefs founded in the Philadelphia ghetto he grew up in (Kahn, 1944) and he felt that if architects concentrated on developing and producing these institutions, civic cooperation would follow.

At this point Kahn begins to separate himself from mainstream modernism. When looking for a new monumentality that can endorse his social values, he looked to historical references, a practice condemned by the modern movement. Though Kahn does not use direct historical references, he concentrates mainly on the structural and technological advances of the past that result in monumentality, citing a cathedral utilising the most advanced structural knowledge of the time as inspiration. He can see similarities in historic technological developments to the progress made possible by innovations from World War II industry. New metal alloys, laminated woods, glass, rubber and plastics excited Kahn and he encouraged others to exploit these new materials. (Kahn, 1944) This eagerness to pioneer new structural possibilities can be traced back to Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, a structural rationalist, who Kahn would have learnt about while being educated in the Beaux-Arts tradition, at the University of Pennsylvania under the tutelage of Paul Cret. (Colquhoun, 2002)



3. *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) national branch – Part of Louis Kahn's Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (1947)*

Kahn's Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (1947) was an entry to an open competition run by his former colleague George Howe, for a cultural centre to celebrate Thomas Jefferson in downtown St. Louis. Despite Kahn's entry being poorly arranged as a whole, there are several social themes included that summarise his beliefs from this stage of his career. The design was for a large cultural centre rather than a static monument, which turned out to be what the judges preferred with the majority of the proposals that got through the first round contained (Kahn's design did not get past the first round). The proposed cultural centre was formed from a large skyscraper, a 'Laboratory of Education', located along the banks of the Mississippi River. Across the plaza from this would be a long, low steel and glass exhibition hall to house the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) national branch³. (Scully, 1962) This structure was formed using the principles discussed in Kahn's *'Monumentality'* essay, utilising new technologies of thin steel members and glass. Between the two structures was a multi-levelled public plaza that could accommodate external exhibitions as well as public meetings and events. Within the plaza were to be two communal murals, one painted the other sculptural, quite obviously symbolising communal collaboration. The painted one was to depict achievements of white, black and Native Americans and their influences on American symbolising cooperation within the whole community. The sculptural mural was to be constructed by citizen groups (community groups, school classes, students and others) working under a 'master artist'. Up close the mural would read as lots of individual panels but from further away, at the civic structures adjacent to the agora, be seen as a monolithic piece of social union. The two buildings were designed in the two prevailing modernist styles; the skyscraper, reminiscent of Le Corbusier's *Skyscrapers at Algiers*; and the UNESCO branch, using a Miesian minimalist glass and steel structure. It could be argued that, despite the proposal lacking a clear narrative as a whole, he was critiquing the two modernised methods in context of his own social program represented by the public plaza they bordered.

Following this entry Kahn became more politically active. He joined the Progressive Citizens of America, a left wing political movement founded by Henry Wallace, who was former

secretary of agriculture to President Truman and would later go on to run for president under the banner of a new third party, The Progressive Party. (Adams, 1985) Kahn was attracted by the party's pledge to increase federal spending on healthcare and education, as well as its active social housing program. Nonetheless, what would have particularly drawn him to the movement was Wallace's international stance, calling for cooperation with the Soviet Union under an international government, the United Nations. Wallace's key aim was to prevent the cold war and what he called a "century of fear" (Goldhagen, 2001), but for Kahn he saw this as an opportunity to expand his theories further. A strong believer in the United Nations, he wished to expand his ideals of communal cooperation to a global scale to create a planetary culture, developing his neighbourhood concept to a global government similar to the UN and UNESCO. Despite the scale, Kahn saw a means of influencing social structure through his architecture. Along with his interest in monumentality and a keen interest in new structural forms and technologies, inspired by his education on Viollet-le-Duc as well as later influences of Buckminster Fuller through his future colleague and wife Anne Tyng, Kahn saw a forceful means of conveying his social agenda.



4. *First Unitarian Church, Rochester (1962)*

Taking this forward, Kahn arguably didn't truly begin to refine his early social agenda within his architecture until his First Unitarian Church, Rochester (1959-1962).⁴ Previously he had been working on refining other design issues, such as his work into 'served and servant space' and creating a technological and structural ideal. With this building a more mature Kahn comes to light, using his altruist beliefs on communal harmony to create an engaging and authentic form of architecture.

Firstly it is important to recognise the context on which Kahn received this commission. The original church was located in a downtown gothic building that was ordered for demolition to make way for a new plaza. (Salzer, 1975) Despite the church initially contacting Kahn about the commission, he would have been attracted by the church's emphasis on social

action over ritualistic worship, the church doctrine declaring “religion that does not express itself through action in human society is not in any sense a religion at all.” (Robinson, 1985) It has always been involved in politics, previously sponsoring surveys into the conditions of city housing and hosting Rochester’s first Planned Parenthood clinic on its premises. (Salzer, 1975) Therefore it is unsurprising that Kahn experienced a strong and enjoyable architect-client relationship with the church committee when designing the new church. They even went as far as to describing him as a “natural Unitarian” (Goldhagen, 2001) in spite of him being Jewish.

As for the building, due to Kahn differing from established modern principles, he appears to have used the historical precedent of a centrally planned Renaissance church, placing the sanctuary at the centre of the plan with the school and other spaces surrounding it separated by an ambulatory. Within his thoughts when conceiving this building was his social determinacy for communal involvement. (Colquhoun, 2002) The common discourse between architects and theoreticians at the time was the fear that the increasing consumerist nature of public culture would lead to the destruction of communal identification and ultimately open a path to authoritarian governance, due to a lack of communal apathy. (Hoffer, 1951) In response, while still teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, the common decorum was that civic structures should monumentally foster an individual’s participation within his or her community. Among Kahn’s closest associates Aldo Giurgola and Tim Vreeland, was the consensus that public buildings had the potential to identify persons within a greater social body, ultimately sharing its ideals. As a result of this continuing debate, Kahn began to value communal life even more than he had done previously. (Goldhagen, 2001)

This new deepened value of communal ethics required a means of communication through the First Unitarian Church. Previous symbolism which he had previously employed in structures like his proposal for the Philadelphia City Hall (utilising new steel and glass technologies) proved incomprehensible, requiring a new means of communicating these values. At Rochester he managed to stress through phenomenological means, communal participation, free choice and an individual’s relationship with the community as a whole, utilising Renaissance and Humanist forms. (Colquhoun, 2002) By employing a human scale within his design, Kahn was able to create a personal nature to his structure that conveyed his agenda clearer than before.

Kahn, a philosopher among architects, also developed his concepts of ‘Form and Design’ and ‘Order’ at Rochester. He asserted that “The program [client brief] is a hindrance,” (Kahn, 1960), linking back to his belief that the architect should act as a social guardian, an activist to design buildings that will only enhance the community and be for the greater good. Within this he deduced that the architect should first identify the institutional ideal, what he described as the “way of life,” (Kahn, 1960) pointing out that different regions have

different social definitions and meanings. The design was therefore the tailoring of the 'Form' into the physical reality, its circumstantial result that belongs to the designer.

The resulting church, as mentioned above, was composed of a central sanctuary encircled by a circulatory space and other space (school classrooms, administrative offices, kitchen). By doing this Kahn opens a dialogue with the user questioning the level of participation they wish to make with the 'form' of the building (initially this promenade was intended to be longer but had to be reduced due to budgetary reasons). The smaller spaces on the peripheries were more intimate, acknowledging a more personal reason for using the church, compared with the large communal gathering space at the heart of the plan where citizen participation is openly encouraged by the architecture. The phenomenological use of light and materials heightened this encouragement giving the user a sense of self and awareness of locality.

It can be argued that this was Kahn's most complete design when considering his social principles within the context of the time. He has found a means of opening a conversation with the user and institution which encourages participation on all levels and heightened by strategic use of light. However, the influence of his thinking when developing the Unitarian church plans can be seen in one of his final designs, the National Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh (1962-83).⁵



5. *National Assembly Building, Dhaka (1983)*

The project was first conceived when Dhaka was the capital of East Pakistan before it became Bangladesh in 1971. (Cahoon, n.d.) At the time Pakistan was under martial law by the self declared Supreme Commander, and former army chief, Ayub Khan, and split in two by India. Generally, East Pakistan was not as successful as its western counterpart. With poorer educational facilities, economic impoverishment and an unmerciful catalogue of natural disasters East Pakistan was not only geologically separated from the west. All national government meetings were also held in West Pakistan resulting in Eastern needs and requests were often overlooked. Concerned with the probable outcome of the next elections, Ayub Khan, sought to win support in East Pakistan by building a National Assembly to prove his regard to the East. A shortlist of three was drawn up of Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto and Louis Kahn; which Corbusier instantly rejected, Aalto was ill at the time so as a result Kahn received the commission by default. (Goldhagen, 2001)

To Kahn this would have been a project he had yearned for, fitting his social and political commitments; a governmental commission would have been the ideal means of conveying his democratic agenda. What made this even more ideal was the client's lack of interest in the final outcome. Ayub Khan was purely desperate to see something begin to be built to improve his stance within the East that Kahn had virtually unlimited funds and no restrictions to his design. A blank canvas on which to form his idealist vision of an institution. (Goldhagen, 2001)

Kahn, buoyed by his success at the completion of his First Unitarian Church (Kahn received the commission for the National Assembly just before the completion of the church), took into account his thinking regarding democracy's social and human responsibilities, monumentality and citizen participation in the public realm as well as lessons he learnt in Rochester, most obvious in the plan. With an open budget Kahn was able to work in proportions he previously never had, utilising a similar Renaissance inspired central plan with the main auditorium located right at the heart of the structure with ambulatory and other spaces encircling it. (Colquhoun, 2002) He once again includes the promenade of inclusion for the user as they enter the building, passing gardens and offices before reaching the circular ambulatory, where a continuous view of the Assembly Building was maintained. (Goldhagen, 2001)

However, one needs to question the appropriateness of the design that was finally built. Forever the advocate for community and social togetherness does the massive, dominating structure, which appears alien when looking at its context, really convey Kahn's beliefs successfully. It can be argued either way, with both sides having relevant points. The scale of the building, with its huge marble faced facade appears to rise out of the ground like a castle from medieval Britain; Kahn in fact calls the complex a "citadel of assembly." (Gast, 1999) This creates a defensive image to those outside almost as if democracy was only for the few inside. Though, this facade is punctuated with geometric apertures which, not only

give a vertical emphasis to an otherwise horizontal plane, show abstract reference to forms within Islamic precedents.

Kahn appears to have lost his humanist scale, so well used at the Unitarian Church, when for example you contemplate the huge, monumental ambulatory surrounding the Assembly Hall. It is this monumental nature that draws awe at the potential of the institution and therefore democracy.

The huge cost to construct such a colossal building also appears farcical when you look at the poverty stricken country it resides within, the money for which could have been spent far more democratically building homes and other small scale communal institutions. However, what is remarkable is how the people of East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, have taken the image of the Assembly complex as their own icon of Bengali identity, despite it being first constructed by a previously overthrown regime.⁶ A testament to the success of a building Louis Kahn worked so tirelessly on yet did not live to see complete.

In conclusion, Louis Kahn's transformation through his career maintained his socio-political edge. His beliefs in encouraging community and citizen participation remained constant throughout his life. Starting out as



6. Rickshaw with National Assembly Building painted on its rear

a strong social activist in the earlier stages of his career, having worked on many public housing projects, joined several groups and discussing ideas openly he later matured into an incredibly thoughtful architect having assembled a large array of knowledge and also understanding of his own theories. He constantly questioned himself and society, using these critiques to inform his theories on 'Form and Design' as well as 'Order' and 'Served and Servant Space.' In addition to this, he was always willing to test the limits of technologies made available by World War II and displayed the structural rationalist influences of his education. Some say that as he matured Kahn became apolitical but this is not the case. This is not the case; he simply engaged his social agenda directly through his architecture, possibly thanks to his expanding understanding of conveying these ideals. One method he particularly mastered, particularly when compared to other architects of the

time was monumentality. He saw a means of utilising the engaging and symbolic characteristics of monumental architecture and applied them on a human scale translating his philosophies into the physical world. Facing issues never before faced by architects, a new modernist movement that disregards historical context within an emerging consumerist market, Kahn was able to create a new style that differentiated itself from mainstream modernists like Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe. Not afraid of using historical precedents, Kahn's use of light and materiality heightened user experiences and engaged them on a phenomenological level that mainstream modernism could not achieve. Seeing architecture as a means of enhancing and encouraging social, political and cultural change, his principles underlay all his designs, a practice that architects could still learn from today.

List of Illustrations

¹ Unknown. (2007), *Carver Court Residential Complex* [ONLINE]. Available at: http://en.wikiarquitectura.com/index.php/File:Complejo_Residencial_Carver_Court.jpg [Accessed 02 December 13].

² E. Teitelman, (1937), *Jersey Homesteads*

³ Kahn Collection, (1947), UNESCO National Centre - Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

⁴ Bruce Coleman, (2002), *First Unitarian Church* [ONLINE]. Available at: <http://www.archdaily.com/84267/ad-classics-first-unitarian-church-of-rochester-louis-kahn/> [Accessed 02 December 13].

⁵ Genesis, (2007), *National Assembly Complex* [ONLINE]. Available at: <http://www.pointedleafpress.com/kabbalah-in-art-and-architecture> [Accessed 02 December 13].

⁶ Sarah Williams Golghagen, (n.d.), *Rickshaw with painting of National Assembly* [BOOK]. Goldhagen, S. W., 2001. *Louis Kahn's Situated Modernism*. 1st ed. London: Yale University Press.

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