

Kahn's Modernism and its Renewal

BY DAVID N. FIXLER

The late architect and historian Stanford Anderson once remarked that authenticity is the third rail of architectural debate — a place to venture at one's peril. Notwithstanding, any architectural intervention demands that we engage and understand what is essential — authentic — in the original to its creator, those for whom it was created and all those all who experience it — to ensure fidelity to the character and integrity of the original work. Louis I. Kahn was one of a handful of truly significant architects of the last 75 years, and arguably the one who (with Le Corbusier) will have the most lasting effect upon architecture over time. As we now assess his legacy and develop interventions for renewal, it is instructive to contemplate how our understanding of Kahn's aesthetic of authenticity — buildings as “instrument[s] that exaggerate, and so heighten one's awareness of nature's infinite variations”¹ — should affect our approach to their conservation, adaptation and renewal.

Kahn had an inordinate interest in creating works whose material authenticity and spatial definition would be evident both autonomously and as component parts of a larger ensemble, thereby clarifying both the tectonic logic of the work and the relationship of these materials to their cultural context. This was both a reaction to the material and spatial ambiguity of the International Style and a nod toward Wright and the post-war Le Corbusier, but at a more fundamental level it was about a desire to reify its expression; to connect the material reality of the work to its site and function, enabling the user to become complicit in the act of its becoming.

Kahn brought mass to Modernism. This tendency, which begins with his childhood exposure to the primal geometric forms of the ruins of Arensburg Castle in Estonia — and is reinforced through his education in the Beaux Arts system under Paul Cret at Penn — took decades to root itself and finally blossom at the core of his architectural sensibility. Upon moving into practice and encountering the shock of the onset of the Great Depression, Kahn embraced Modernism — being particularly drawn to its commitment to the creation of buildings and places embodying social and economic justice. While his early works, both at the domestic and the urban scale are more conventionally related to the International Style and contemporary trends in social housing, through his engagement in the debates on monumentality that emerged in the 1940s and his re-acquaintance with the primal poetics of light, space and form of the ruins of antiquity during his stint at the American Academy in Rome in 1950, Kahn found himself increasingly trying to express what he viewed as essential, ineffable architectural truths.

Kahn further focused on the singularity of the room as an element of composition and the generator of the plan —

a “society of rooms” — and to the primacy of human sensory experience as an individual situated within a community in a manner arguably also achieved only by Alvar Aalto among his contemporaries. His use of concrete for instance stressed the refinements of its making, the almost decorative possibilities of the dressing of the joint and its masterful juxtaposition with other materials such as brick and wood, rather than the more raw, sculptural concrete architecture that would come to be known as Brutalism. Kahn's evocation of history in fact reflects a modernist's search to more deeply integrate the principles he saw as the essence of the power of archaic, particularly antique architecture in its ruined state — into an ethos of human-centered placemaking in service of uplifting the human condition. He achieves this through a methodology that combines an essential understanding of the evocative power of architectural form as it has been used throughout history with an understanding of contingent present circumstance — which includes a rigorous commitment to formal abstraction.

Renewal without disrupting the aura that Kahn generated in his best work is both art and an exacting science. As the essays within this volume affirm, the successful conservation and in some cases transformation of Kahn's work demands rigorous scholarship, design and technical precision and a strong dose of both creative restraint and emotional detachment. More perhaps than any architect of the 20th century, Kahn is viewed as a sage whose aphorisms contributed to his reputation as a quasi-mystical figure. While these sayings have meaning and have undoubtedly contributed to Kahn's exalted stature they can also be mis-read when taken out of context and contribute to a hagiographic interpretation of his work that can inhibit the intellectual autonomy necessary to formulate optimal rehabilitation scenarios.

Which brings us to the work at hand. Most of the essays in this volume directly address the rehabilitation of a representative cross-section of Kahn's mature works through strategies of conservation, restoration and adaptive reuse. The earliest of these — the Yale Art Gallery, was also the first of Kahn's buildings to undergo a comprehensive rehabilitation. Lloyd DesBrisay's essay focuses not merely on the renovation, but instead poses the question, through comparison of the rigorous approach undertaken to the Yale project to the neglect of a now demolished structure by Kahn, the Coward Shoe store in Central Philadelphia, as to the validity of the relative heritage values of different building types (commercial vs. institutional) within the panoply of modern resources.

Anne Weber and Michael Mills discuss the meticulous process undertaken to stabilize and restore Kahn's seminal Trenton

Bath House, raising questions familiar to those who work with ancient structures and ruins as to how much of the evidence of wear and decay should be left as a testament to the building's change over time — particularly as in this case it was at least to some degree the architects original intent create a work that would wear its age in this fashion — and what kinds of measures are appropriate to design into the intervention to arrest further deterioration.

My own essay on the Richards Lab renovations describes the implementation of adaptive reuse and energy enhancement strategies necessary to enable Richards to continue to serve a useful function. Richards is a classic example of an iconic but chronically dysfunctional work that required robust technical and programmatic intervention to ensure its survival. Here is where addressing the notion as to what makes these works genuine — what defines the underlying authenticity of the resource — becomes important as part of the art of meshing conservation with creative interpretation of character definition to achieve optimal technical and aesthetic results.

As work that is now part of a larger conservation management planning process, Kyle Normandin and Sara Lardinois present a glimpse into the exhaustive project to restore the teak wood paneling system at the Salk Institute — highlighting an effort that seeks to maximize retention of original fabric, while at the same time optimally balancing the client's desire for a consistent appearance with Kahn's original intent to allow the teak to weather to a natural gray finish, which could not occur due to the presence of fungal spores from the Eucalyptus trees present on the site.

The topic of wood conservation is pursued further by Andrew Fearon in an essay describing the history and ongoing conservation efforts at several of Kahn's houses, all of which utilize various species of wood cladding and fenestration. Once again, the efforts are geared to executing durable solutions that still enable the acquisition of patina, and the considerable effort — both in the rehabilitation and in ongoing and future maintenance — that is necessary to strike that optimum balance. In both this and the Salk essays, it is important to note that the authors are careful to place their efforts in the larger context of these buildings as representative works of Kahn, and how their efforts in renewing these character-defining materials must continue to mesh with and represent the full range of values inherent in each resource.

In the early 2000s, The Yale Center for British Art was the first of Kahn's buildings to undertake a comprehensive conservation management plan, and this work in turn set the tone for an exemplary rehabilitation project that was completed in 2016. Renovation architect George Knight describes the process by which interventions were undertaken to upgrade systems, restore or replace worn finishes, and in several areas, to undertake changes that enable the realization of more of Kahn's original design intent — particularly the opening of the long gallery. While these kinds of interventions inevitably invite questions as to the legitimacy — and authenticity — of implementing unexecuted ideas after the fact, in this case the change can be justified through strong programmatic or practical technical reasons.

Brinda Somaya tackles serious material conservation issues as well as programmatic updates in her work on renovations to

portions of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad. The problems relating to the conservation of deteriorating brick masonry and reinforcement in the typical exterior wall systems are ongoing (and to some degree intractable) issues that particularly highlight the importance of adhering to strict conservation protocols for cleaning and maintenance in order to prolong rather than shorten the material service life. She also touches on how technology and changes in pedagogy have altered the function of the library and how these alterations were managed in a way that respects the original idea and fabric to the greatest degree possible.

The final contribution is a documentary essay by Jeremie Hoffman and Hadas Nevo-Goldberst on Kahn's only executed work in Israel, the Wolfson School of Mechanical Engineering at Tel Aviv University, which was not completed until 1980, six years after his death. This is a large, complex but relatively little-known work outside of Israel, and while this paper presents foundational knowledge about the building and its genesis, as a lesser known and largely posthumous project of Kahn's, this is a work that will benefit from further future research.

The renewal of Kahn's legacy simultaneously reinforces traditional conservation methodologies, while demanding that we confront — at Kahn's behest — the authenticity of the well-used and weathered artifact with Ruskinian skepticism as to the ultimate wisdom of what one is to undertake in managing its long-term stewardship. Kahn clearly believed his buildings should last and display the marks of their age, regarding this as positive affirmation that his work expresses essential truths about the relationship of humankind to the built environment, and through it to nature.

Thus, to renew is not to make new; rather it is to stabilize and regenerate, acknowledging the effects of both the passage of time and the evolution of function on the structure; carefully interweaving repairs and new elements in ways that balance their newness against the rich, patinated qualities of the original material. The precision and quality of Kahn's architecture demands that these issues be confronted and addressed head on — though they will be met with often withering scrutiny. The project case studies herein illustrate the struggle to achieve this “authentic” balance, and it is our hope that they will contribute to the rich dialogue that has emerged within **docomomo** and the broader design and conservation communities on how to sustain, renew, enhance — and thereby assure the survival of — both the legacy of Kahn and by extension the rich and diverse heritage of Modernism.

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Notes

- 1 Sarah Goldhagen: *Louis Kahn's Situated Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001, 158.