

## David B. Brownlee Interviewed by Ana Tostões

In February 2018, Ana Tostões interviewed David Brownlee, pioneer researcher on Louis I. Kahn and an historian of modern architecture and professor of the history of art at the University of Pennsylvania, in order to debate Kahn's realm of ideas and their contemporary significance.

David Brownlee was guest curator of the exhibition *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992), and is co-author of the homonymous book (with David G. De Long, New York, 1991, translated into four other languages) that stands as the first worldwide comprehensive publication on Louis I. Kahn

**Ana Tostões** What have moved you to approach Louis I. Kahn and to edit, with David De Long, the book *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (1991)?

**David Brownlee** I was interested in Kahn for three converging reasons: 1) Having been born and grown up in Philadelphia, I was always acutely aware of that distinctive and relatively underappreciated architectural character, 2) when I graduated from college, in 1973, Kahn was still alive and he was the great hero of the time, representing a new future for modern architecture, representing a change. We had to sort of look ahead of the text book to see beyond Le Corbusier which is where my first teacher in modern architecture tended to stop, 3) in 1980, when I finished my PhD, I got a job at the University of Pennsylvania. The university had just recently received the deposit there all the papers from the office of Kahn. They were uncatalogued and not ready to study. So, suddenly I was there, 29 years-old, with this great mountain of material from Kahn, arguably the most important architect in the world after WWII. The former Dean of the School of Design at Penn, G. Holmes Perkins, mostly known as Dean Perkins, hired Julia Moore Converse to be the curator of the architectural archives – which was a hypothetical one, because there was no archive: there was a pile of boxes, the Friedrich Weinbrenner drawings and a scattering of other things that Holmes had purchased. Julia and I recognized that our moral responsibility was to undertake the study of the Kahn papers. When we were beginning, there was no institutional establishment for this, so the first thing we decided to do was a small project which could earn credibility for the architectural archives so we could do something bigger. That's why we chose to work on Friedrich Weinbrenner, and we managed, in fact, to win a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, establishing the architectural archives as a professional organization. Then David De Long came to Penn, from Columbia University, to be the head of the historic preservation program, and we quickly became friends. Soon we decided that we needed to work with Julia Converse to organize the papers of Kahn and try to understand this most important American architect. Even if, up

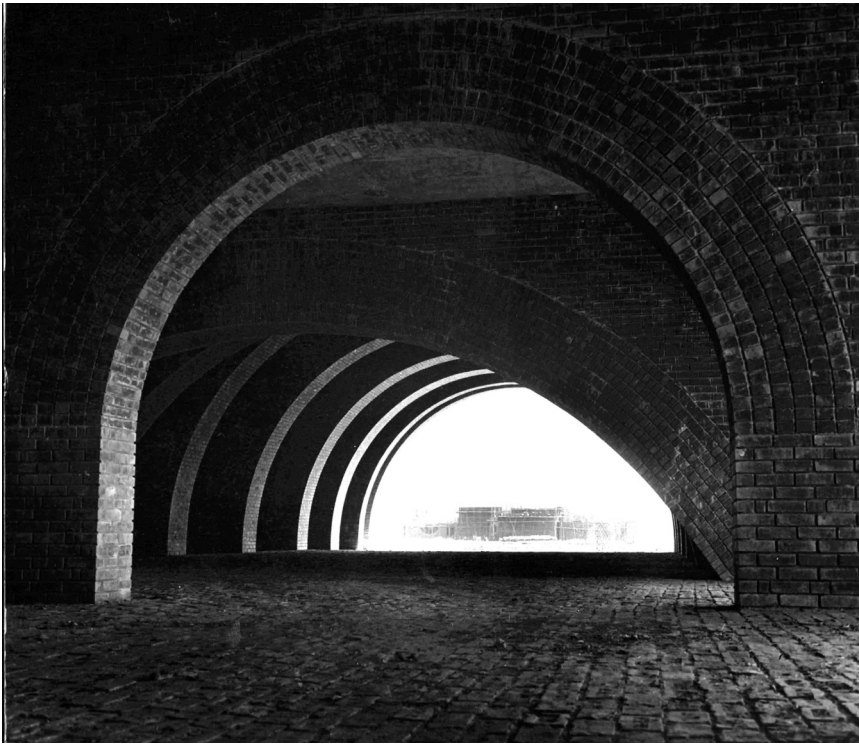
until this time, I had worked mostly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and on European architecture, being a Philadelphian in Philadelphia, I recognized almost a moral importance of accepting this responsibility. Then, David and I started holding, for a number of years, seminars in which our students began to look at the materials. We spent several years teaching and trying to begin establishing, with the students, a timeline and a chronology. This was fundamental, because no one knew him before the Yale Art Gallery. Like the invisible man, Kahn suddenly became apparent in 1951. Then, there was also the myth of him as being a hopelessly mystical, impossibly impractical man, whose greatest achievements were in seducing a lot of women. We were determined to be as objective and scholarly as we could possibly be. Recognizing the vastness of the work, we realized that we needed to work with a team of other scholars, now graduated students in Historic Preservation and in Art History, some of them extremely important. Julia Converse, along the way, got Garland Press interested in joining the team, as they believed it would be valuable to publish all the drawings of Kahn. And they did it. This enormous series of volumes was created from all the tiny little, faint drawings of Kahn. Then Richard Koshalek, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, who was very interested in architecture, conceived the idea of a Kahn exhibition. Like David and me, he recognized the great opportunity for a complete presentation on Kahn at that time, so he and his assistant director, Sherri Geldin, started to work on it. To work on Kahn, they naturally had to come to Penn, where they found David and me, who became the guest curators of the exhibition. The exhibition offered the opportunity to create the book that became "the" book you were speaking of. It has essays by David, me, and by our students who went on to be now well-established and quite famous architecture historians in their own right. That book was produced for the exhibition that Richard Koshalek agreed to open in Philadelphia, even though it was organized in Los Angeles. It was an exhibition designed by the architect Arato Isozaki with an attention to detail that I had never seen. Every wall had an elevation drawing showing where every object and

every label would. All new color photography was commissioned from a Californian photographer, Grant Mumford, and we experimented with things like having video in the exhibition: amazing, moving objects!

**AT** There were videos with films of Kahn?

**DB** No. In a sense we were trying to depersonalize it a little bit because of the myth and the cult around his personality. We were trying to be objective art historians, which means, at first, to look at the objects and to analyze the data. Besides, we were also trying to deconstruct the dogma at that time, which was that Kahn had been the father of Postmodernism. There were people who literally said "Kahn was great, if he'd just gone all the way and put a real temple portico on his buildings, if he'd just gotten over his inhibitions and really made a building that looked genuinely Romanesque", that he was timid, and "it took brave younger architects like Robert Venturi and Bob Stern to go all the way to classical architecture". It's certainly the case that Kahn embraced history and, in that respect, he was, I guess we could say, a sort of forefather of the Postmodernism. But one of the results of our frankness was that, when we put the show up, it was not very popular. When we mounted the show in the early 1990s, Kahn was sort of out of fashion and there was a prevailing notion that "well, what is really happening now is Postmodernism, and Kahn just really didn't get all the way there. And so, there was this global kind of criticism, perceptible in a lot of reviews. Kahn's importance is recognized more today than it was then. In a way, I think we could say that at the time, the historical narrative was that the future was Postmodernism, that Modernism was dead, and that Kahn was still a modernist. This is sort of interesting, but it is an historical dead-end, and what I think we've seen on the last 30 years is that Modernism has had enormous staying power, an enormous vitality and an ability to reinvent itself, and I think Kahn was really among the first to do this, to see that within Modernism there were ideas that could be continuously refreshed – probably because in some respects they were not really modern: they were ancient ideas about timeless things.

**AT** I was not aware of the debate on Kahn being considered a post-modern architect here. I always understood his importance within the Modern Movement as a work in progress through 20<sup>th</sup> century and even 21<sup>st</sup> century. Contrary to some other modern architects, understanding architecture within a global scope, he was able to make the link with memory, with no prejudice. But he was certainly not in the postmodern line.



**01** Louis Kahn, National Assembly Building of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1964-1982. © Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

**DB** Kahn didn't accept the degradation that happened to Modernism in the 1940s and the 1950s, after the Bauhaus people came to America; it was a sort of commercialized Modernism, with its sincerity and artistic content reduced. It was like a new "style". Other kinds of Modernism were happening, but in America we sort of clunked into the International Style that became a corporate style, where the lightweight transparent box became the norm. There was a famous cartoon of a young architect taking a sheet of graph paper, gridded paper, and simply cutting it out and taping it to his drawing as the façade of the building. What Kahn managed to do was, in some respects, take Modernism back to its moral and philosophical roots, conceiving architecture as a project serving human beings. That architecture was about honesty, with a moral dimension with respect for people, and the responsibility of integrity and respect to materials. And architecture, that is great architecture, was conceived with history in mind.

Le Corbusier was not afraid of history either...

**AT** Not at all. He followed history. He went to the places he thought could be challenging and inspirational. To Turkey, Greece, Italy. Aalto came to Italy and to the North Africa too.

**DB** Absolutely. I think that Kahn revived that tradition.

**AT** We are talking about coming back to the roots of the Modern Movement and to the concept of honesty, putting people together,

with simplicity, but also by calling the meaning of the symbol. I think the symbol is one of the main keys on Kahn.

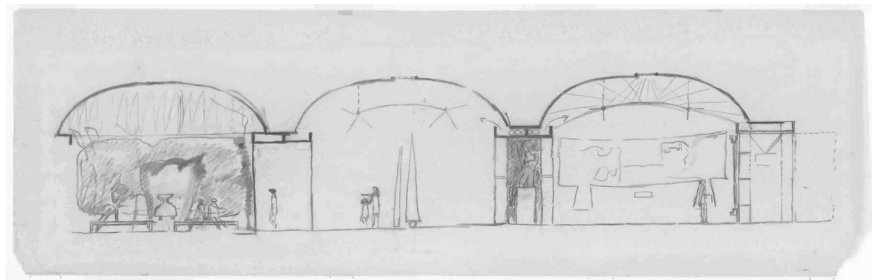
**DB** I think it is, too. A very important thing he did was rejecting the idea that the Modern Movement was just a bunch of abstractions, a group of geometrical forms, that it was just a matter of composition. He did deeply believe in society, and this is something that was neglected for a period in appreciating him. He believed in a social project for architecture. He is known by that famous phrase that architecture begins with "form", and we think of form as being physical shape, but he didn't think that way at all. Form was the human institution that was to occupy the building, and it began with an understanding of how human beings interacted and used that particular building. If I did myself one thing in the book that I am very proud of, it was to emphasize Kahn's own political formation in the 1930s-1940s as a socially progressive architect. As a man who was actually the

chairman of the American Institute of Architects committee on the desegregation of the profession. He was that kind of politically-engaged person. And the fact that he talks so much about art and abstraction in his latter career tended to obscure the fact that there was, at the heart of his architecture, this deep commitment to architecture as a human and social project. I think that is also related to the grand tradition of modern architecture, where abstract forms are used for higher social purposes.

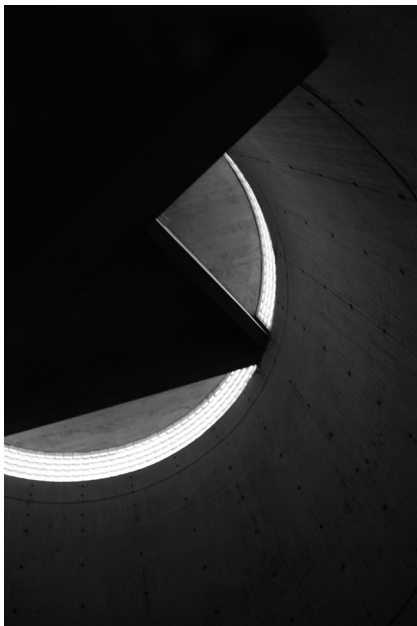
Kahn work was intensely humanist, both embracing the individual and the society. The sense of individual is present in that Kahn phrase "a great city is a place where a small boy, as he walks through it, will find what he wants to do for the rest of his life". Then, there is so much in his work that talks about architecture and people as communities: he says that a plan is a community of rooms and that the street is a room by agreement: the agreement of buildings that surround the street to come together and create a place. The deep underlying humanism in his work flies in the face of two things: one, already mentioned, is the commercialization of the International Style and its development as a corporate style, as a brand for the American international imperialism of the period, and the other thing is his rejection of the sterile formalism into which modern art had descended. There is a very strong tradition in American criticism of painting that exalts abstraction, that asserts the absolute pre-eminence of form and shape. Even if Kahn's works sort of look like that sometimes, he rejects it philosophically, he rejects its disconnection from the human, and that notion of autonomy.

Getting back to your question about symbolism, I think the degree to which Kahn buildings evoke, stir in our memories, and draw on the feelings we have established in previous experiences, is very powerful.

Kahn buildings have two kinds of weight: one is their physical weight (and that is somehow a rejection of the physical character of the glass box), and the weight of "serious purpose" – the moral weight. It is there where the fundamental, universal symbolism of architecture becomes foundational. It's not



**02** Louis Kahn, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, USA, 1966-1972. © Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.



**03** Louis Kahn, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, 1953. © Ana Tostões, 2018.

about that kind of specific symbolism like “this looks like it’s Christian” or “this looks like it’s French” – even though people do argue about it, and I think that there is something to be said about the buildings in Bangladesh and in Ahmedabad in relation to Mughal architecture and to the indigenous architecture of Muslim South Asia – but I do think that it is about a more open-ended evocation of memory. His buildings do not primarily invite you to imagine the future but invite you to recognize how the present is connected to and strengthened by tradition. I believe the great achievement of Kahn was his effort to create buildings that were not romantic and retrospective but drew on the great powerful tradition of human accomplishment to give us the confidence to move forward. In the end, these are buildings that are not about the past, they are very much about the present and the contemporaneity.

**AT** And about the future.

**DB** And about the future, but it is a present and a future that can draw confidence from the great things that human beings have accomplished in the past.

**AT** How do you connect the “simplest” program, which is the house – with its close relationship with the family and the domestic program – with the great buildings with social committed programs, also considering that Kahn first 20 years of practice as an architect were spent on designing houses?

**DB** Yes, it is very important to remember that Kahn in the 1930s and in the 1940s was mainly an architect of houses and that during the WWII he wrote, working with Oscar Stonorov, two wonderful little booklets

about city planning, which were basically about housing and cities. In that respect, he was really part of the Modern Movement’s commitment to social housing. I do think that he thought of most large public buildings as essentially large houses, as his conception of served and servant spaces is, in many respects, fundamentally a domestic conception composed by a large room and an encircling group of smaller rooms that surrounded it, with the idea that everyone would come together in the middle room, that would be the family gathering place. We can identify these principles in the Erdman Dormitory at the Bryn Mawr college, where each one of the three diamonds has a perimeter of student rooms and a gathering place in the middle; in the Rochester Church, with the sanctuary in the middle; in the Assembly building in Bangladesh, Dhaka, with the central assembly hall. And these are reciprocal things because there is, in a sense, the domestication of public architecture, but there is also the heroic monumentalization of domestic architecture. I believe he really thought that individual life was heroic, and that collective life was somehow domestic.

Philadelphia’s “little streets” are those kinds of spaces: they are like outdoor rooms with the conception of a common central space, and a surrounding periphery of smaller spaces; it is like the urban planning enlargement of that idea of a building, where the street, as a communal space, may act as a served space, bringing that sense of community. Philadelphians live in houses, in their connection to the community, and that is really important to Kahn’s conception of the house; it is rooted in Philadelphia thinking. My favorite buildings by Kahn are the faculty houses in Ahmedabad at the Indian Institute of Management. It is a row of rowhouses turned 30°, so that each of them has a little private front yard and a little private backyard; it is the lesson of Philadelphia rowhouse energized by a bit of abstract geometry.

**AT** In the *Realm of Architecture*’s chapter on transcendence, we may understand the light question in connection to a kind of desire for transcendence. I believe it was through a common denominator to those two spheres – private and public – that Kahn looked to achieve that transcendence, giving people emotion. And even knowing very well how to use modules and having a draconian discipline on construction systems, within his commitment to people and society, he never repeated projects.

**DB** I think you’re right to emphasize the striving, dynamic relationship of what he calls silence and light, in an abstract sense. He says that light is the real in the material, and silence is the realm of ideas, defining that the role of the architect is to transport abstractions from silence and bring them into

the light of day. I think that idea in the realm of art and architecture has its parallel in his vision of society which is an understanding that individual has certain demands and desires, rather materialistic and mechanical, but that the individual is energized by a desire to join with others to create something more than physical and material. That project is completed in the creation of those institutions of assembly, whether they are churches or national parliament buildings or world fairs; those places where people come together and become more than just the little physical entities they are. They add up to something greater than they would be if they were standing just side by side.

Both in architecture and in society, there is the understanding that the great designer or the great social planner will be the one who is able to build a bridge between the material and the ideal, between the individual and the collective good, between the solution of mechanical problems and the achievement of artistic ideals. In Kahn’s later discussions of the role of the architect, he says the architect works at the threshold between silence and light, between the real and the ideal; he says that that intermediary position means to basically to be there at the doorstep, to help things move from the material to the ideal, from the selfishly individualistic to the communitarian. That’s the architect’s position; that’s the architect’s job. It’s to be there, at the door.

#### David Brownlee

(b. 1951, Philadelphia, USA). Architectural historian, PhD, professor of the history of art at the University of Pennsylvania.

He has won several fellowships, and his work has earned major publication prizes from the British and American Societies of Architectural Historians and from the American Institute of Architects. He has been elected a Fellow of the Society of Architectural Historians and is a recipient of the University of Pennsylvania’s Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching. He was the chair of the committees that proposed the reshaping of the University of Pennsylvania’s undergraduate residences in 1997 and directed the implementation of a comprehensive system of College Houses, serving as Director of the Office of College Houses and Academic Services for four years.

Amongst his most important publications are *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (with David G. De Long, 1991, translated into four other languages), *Making a Modern Classic: The Architecture of the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (1997), *Building America’s First University: An Historical and Architectural Guide to the University of Pennsylvania* (with George Thomas, 2000), *Out of the Ordinary: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Associates: Architecture, Urbanism, Design* (with David De Long and Kathryn Hiesinger, 2001), and *The Barnes Foundation: Two Buildings, One Mission* (2012).

He was guest curator of the exhibition *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (1992) that took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and other venues, and was co-author of the homonymous book (1991), the first worldwide comprehensive publication on Kahn.