

William Whitaker interviewed by Ana Tostões

In February 2018, Ana Tostões interviewed William Whitaker, curator and collections manager of the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, where the Louis I. Kahn Collection is hosted, in order to debate the importance of documentation for the preservation of Kahn's legacy. William Whitaker was curatorial consultant of the exhibition *Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture* (Vitra Design Museum, 2012) and is the co-author of *The Houses of Louis I. Kahn* (with George Marcus, 2013), the first comprehensive publication on the architect's house designs. The management of the Louis I. Kahn Collection has been having a fundamental role, not only in the documentation and interpretation of Kahn's life and work, but also in the success of the contemporary rehabilitation projects undertaken in his buildings.

Ana Tostões We are in the Kroiz Gallery at the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania. These archives are the driving force for supporting the preservation of the unique legacy of Louis I. Kahn. Bill, you have done fantastic work here, not just in the conservation of the papers in literal terms, but also in connecting people. This is an incredible positive sign for the future.

William Whitaker Yes. This is an archive that is valuable beyond the academy and museum. It is integral with maintaining built heritage and to understanding Kahn's ideas and intent. And that's inspiring. It's exciting to understand the level of thinking that went into his work and, later, to witnessing the thoughtful engagement of those responsible for conserving these buildings with his legacy. We've seen that demonstrated at places like the Yale Center for British Art, the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, and the Toby and Steven Korman House, among others. Great art demands a high level of thinking and understanding for its endurance. We can testify to that and recognize our role in it.

AT Congratulations for that, Bill. The Archives have quite a diverse collection, is that correct?

WW Absolutely. We are more than the Louis I. Kahn Collection. The Architectural Archives were established in 1978 and quickly grew to more than 100 collections. Our holdings range from models and drawings – some tiny and others as large as a trestle table – to papers, photographs, material samples and fragments, as well as film and video. One of our largest objects is an ornamental screen designed by Robert Venturi for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Today, our collections include the vast archive of Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and a range of over 400 others dating from the 17th century to the present. We are particularly proud of the many collections that add depth to our core holdings; those of Kahn's in particular.

AT So, when you acquired the Kahn collection in 1978, we may say that the Archives got more value in a way, because it was a "round collection", including drawings, writings, and all kinds of different sources.

WW It is a "rounded" archive in the sense that it contains everything that was in Kahn's office at the time he died – from business

records and correspondence from his day-to-day practice to the over 36,000 drawings covering the full development of many of his greatest works, but not all of them. Somehow, not everything was saved or preserved. It has been said that Kahn did not realize or appreciate the value of his drawings until Arthur Drexler put them on view at MoMA in 1961. Other records were kept by clients. Fortunately, many of his clients have seen the value in donating their holdings to the Architectural Archives.

AT In your daily work, you are in contact with people close to Kahn's work, collecting stories and other elements necessary to understand and enrich the Archives.

WW Yes, that's true. We started with the idea of beginning a collection – that will, obviously, never be truly complete – and then seeking out the many layers that can add meaning and depth to the collection. The network of people is fundamental: there are collaborators who run projects (and payroll too) who have material in the personal possession; there are those who were working out in the field overseeing construction (and who bring you the story of living in Bangladesh while sorting out how to actually build the Capital complex at Dhaka and their interactions with that country's culture and climate); there are the collaborators outside the office, specifically engineers or landscape architects, who worked as consultants and played important roles (such as August Komendant or Harriet Pattison. Both worked closely with Kahn on several major works and donated their collections to the Archives). We recognized that the collections of clients are important. The houses are a central part of Kahn's built legacy in the Philadelphia region. Clients have knowledge and insight into Kahn's working process and, because of the relatively small scale of a house commission, allow a closer understanding of his creativity.

AT So, your work at the Archives is not just to organize things, it is done through creative and interpretive research. Your book, *The Houses of Louis Kahn* (with George Marcus, Yale, 2013), seems to me to act as the fulfillment of your research and contact with Kahn's clients, staff, etc.

WW The organizing part is incredibly important.

AT Of course! But when you are organizing, you are studying, and then you start your process of interpretation.

WW Sure. It is fundamentally a process to gain intellectual control of a group of items of historical significance. The discipline of that is incredibly important so that others can get to it too. But implicit to that is the sense of why you are saving this material, why it is of value, why it matters, and how it can engage with audiences today.

AT And you connect that with a kind of social or educational mission too.

WW Yes, because we are talking about the artist's imagination. This is what we have as evidence of a vital thinking process that occurred, that played out and resulted in buildings like the Kimbell Art Museum. To have the chance of understanding even a fragment of what happened is inspiring and an incredible learning tool.

AT To be able to understand how the vaults of the Kimbell were done, and how that light was achieved, might be something absolutely extraordinary.

WW Or simply to understand the way that nature reveals itself in a building. Archives can reveal insights into this in wonderful ways. Architects get paid to do a particular commission, but they also do a lot of things they don't get paid for: they collect books, they travel and record their experiences in sketchbooks and journals, they take photographs, they "waste" their time and money in many different ways and places, because they can't stop themselves from doing so! This is something at the very heart of creativity, a glimpse into what the artist needs to fuel the spirit. Take for example the architect's notebooks. It is common to find a name and address written in the front of the book along with the line, "if found please return to" – a kind of confirmation that it is a thing of value. Kahn, however, never put his name in his sketchbooks. He misplaced some and "borrowed" volumes from others (their handwriting sometimes mistaken by some



01 Louis Kahn, Korman House, Whitemarsh Township, Pennsylvania, USA, 1971–1973. © Ana Tostões, 2018.

for Kahn's). He tore pages out, he sent these pages as letters or notes to others. They are a total disaster, with no sense of continuity. The only reason why Kahn carried a notebook was to have a piece of paper handy, something to draw out his ideas on. But once he had done so, once the realization was fixed, he moved on. He didn't need to return. Every creative architect is different and that is one of the lessons you can take from an archive.

AT Through the material you have in the archive, the collaboration with Luis Barragan and Kahn's references to the monastery of Assisi, are you able to tell us how, in the Salk Institute, he proceeded to arrive at the decision of have the courtyard open to the sea and sky, with no trees?

WW That happened very late in the project. In 1965, Jonas Salk and other key colleagues at the Institute had moved into the North building and were overlooking the court space which had always been intended to be a cloistered garden, filled with trees crisscrossed by small water courses. The idea of the monastic experience with its ritual, retreat, and dedication, was a defining characteristic of the project up until that moment. Kahn spoke of such things and one finds little sketches on the margins of his Salk studies that refer to the great monastery at Assisi, among other sites in Italy. Salk's son Jonathan recently recalled to me witnessing his father meeting with Kahn at their lake house in West Virginia during the summer of 1960, and how Jonas took time to explain to his child the importance of Assisi and how it spoke to the aspirations he and his architect had for the project. This all happened five years before Kahn's call to Barragan. From the moment when the Mexican architect walked out onto the plateau overlooking the Pacific and uttered – "but it's a plaza" – the power of the void space, what would become the courtyard, took hold of the creative imagination. To reconstruct the story, we can look

to the letters exchanged between Kahn and Barragan, between Kahn and Larry Halprin (who was also consulted at the time – and whose collection is among those held by the archives), we can speak to two men who translated over the phone or on site in La Jolla, and we can pour over drawings (both at Penn and in the Barragan Collection in Basel). To reconstruct the story takes many, many layers of information, not only from primary source materials, which are essential as a framework, but, as we are dealing with the recent past, we can also learn from the actors and participants who were part of the action and provide us a range of viewpoints into a defining moment. The end result is having a world of creativity opened up for you.

AT It is amazing to realize that Kahn was so flexible with his clients and how important lessons can be taken from studying how the drawings change over time.

WW Building a collection like this leads one to other places, to seek out other points of view. John Nicolais, an architect trained at Penn and a very talented photographer, took over 800 photographs of the Salk over the course of 15 years – from 1964 to 1979 when he tragically died at age 40. His images, beautiful as they are, also were particularly useful for the recent work to restore the teak windows (a project led by Susan MacDonald at the Getty Conservation Institute). These images documented the kind of change over time that was occurring at the Salk and shaped attitudes about maintenance that went against Kahn's design intent. The photos helped to reset those expectations.

AT What do you think about the possibilities of the Archives – with its resources in drawings, photos, models, sketches, etc. – has for the education of architects? I imagine students coming to the Archives just to study, to research buildings and how they were made. I remember during my studies, the time we spent understanding just

one drawing, discussing a sketch, and how we discovered more things each year. This is an important part of the education of an architect. I've always admired the last sentence of the **docomomo** constitution because it is about learning from good examples, for the sake of doing better architecture.

WW I couldn't agree more. We have many students who engage with the collections through tours and talks (over 1,000 last year). Sometimes they are intimidated by the real thing. They don't know if they can engage with it. So, one of our key roles is opening up this heritage, to help students among others to understand that it is accessible to them and that there are narratives in the materials which they can discover for themselves. It's like creating a path and making a door. Sometimes students come in and they know what they are looking for, but often they do not. It is our job to help build the skills in research, visual literacy, and – frankly – creativity. It helps to be an architect myself in this pursuit. We are also able to link the experience of the collection at the Archive with the experience of visiting Kahn's built work – particularly his houses. That opens the door in a different and powerful way.

AT It's a great richness for students.

WW I think they get a lesson of lasting value.

AT Can you please share your thoughts on the future of Kahn's heritage?

WW There was a recent crisis at the Kimbell Art Museum involving the construction of a 12 story, glass-clad hotel, directly on axis with the magnificent garden court that would have irrevocably transformed the relationship of the building and its garden landscape. It was a big project, involving tax incentives, a new arena, the city council, and many stakeholders. It caught everyone at the Kimbell and the neighboring museums by surprise. Fortunately, the decision to allow the development to proceed was reversed. Kimbell staff and trustees now understand how sudden changes can occur and how those changes can be beyond their control.

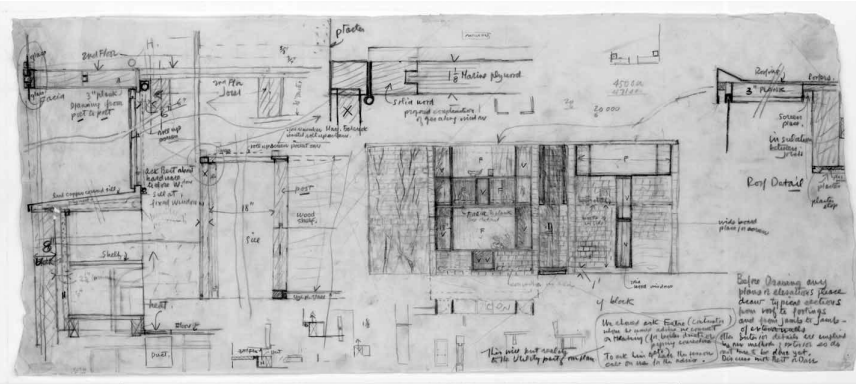
In many ways, Kahn's buildings are about more than just bricks and mortar. They are about a larger sense of character that the structure – building and landscape together – prepares you for as you arrive at the site. The sense of calm repose at the Kimbell, with its garden groves, graveled walks and animated fountains prepare you for and enhance the experience of the art within. Kahn's vaults, of course, add to that magic. The pressures of expansion, of development, that encroach upon a historic resource, remains a vexing concern, Kahn's legacy or otherwise.

If we look at the success of the Salk Institute, an incredible institution and place to work, where pressure to provide the best,



02 Louis Kahn, National Assembly Building of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1964-1982. © Harry Palmbaum Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

03 Louis Kahn, Esherick House, Philadelphia, USA, 1959-1961. © Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.



04 Louis Kahn, Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India, 1962-1974. © Anant Raje Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

and most up-to-date facilities is a constant or to Dhaka, Bangladesh, where terrorist attacks and security concerns have cut off access to the site by the people of that country. The people cannot get close to the building anymore. And that was never anticipated in Kahn's work or his ideas for the building.

So that's the larger sense of encroachment. Returning to the Kimbell. It was a wake-up call for the community of Fort Worth: in resisting the hotel development, the neighboring museums – the Amon Carter (Philip Johnson) and the Museum of Fine Arts (Tadao Ando) came together and recognized they could no longer take a passive view.

AT It means the success of a cultural district, with an incredible architectural heritage!

WW Yes, and there are people who want to live in the area for that very reason. They are building new residential areas with restaurants and exciting nightlife. And this is great. It is just sad when it gets to a point

where it is too much. And this hotel was an example of that.

AT Regarding Kahn's work in India, the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, what are your concerns for the coming times?

WW Well, there encroachment is very real concern. It is the most complete campus in Kahn's work: the embodiment of his notion of "school" where places beyond the classroom – where students live and where the informal aspect of education happens – is beautifully expressed in the landscape, in the buildings, and in the relationships in between.

The city of Ahmedabad has grown tremendously and what was an outlying area with a village like atmosphere is now quite urban. There is now no space for the campus to expand and the pressure to do so is becoming acute. Kahn integrated an area for faculty housing that encompasses about 2/3 of his site plan. These are modest structures of brick with deep porches, with provisions in the site

plan allowing for privacy and garden spaces. There is an attitude that these structures no longer fulfill the expectations of faculty and should be replaced by high-rise tower structures. That would be a shame. Positive steps have been taken by the administration at IIM towards heritage conservation. They've designated the central court area as Louis Kahn Plaza and begun to invest in restoration of areas in the campus's central area, including classrooms, administration, library and dormitories. But their approach has been piecemeal. No assessment has been made of the significance of the whole and their process lacks transparency.

In the days before his death on March 17, 1974, Kahn made sketches for two buildings for the IIM – a management development center (MDC) and a dining hall. Those sketches were the basis for the work that his close collaborator Anant Raje completed, transforming initial ideas into wonderful structures very much in keeping with Kahn's spirit. There were few people Kahn trusted as much as Raje. The MDC, in particular, is threatened by ignorance of Kahn's role in its design.

Understanding the history, how the buildings have changed over time, and establishing policies that protect heritage values, can be a positive framework for the future. Kahn's buildings are tough, they are beautifully built, even robust, but they are fragile too. That's part of their magic. Educating stakeholders about this fragility is something the Archives is very committed to supporting.

William Whitaker

(b. 1970, USA). Architect and architectural historian, curator of the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania School of Design. He has lectured on a broad range of subjects related to 20th century architecture, landscape, and community design in the greater Philadelphia region, to audiences in the United States, Canada, Germany and India. He has organized and co-curated over 30 exhibitions, including retrospectives on Antonin and Noemi Raymond (2006), Wharton Esherick (2008), and Anne Griswold Tyng (2011) and served as the director of research for the landmark retrospective, *Out of the Ordinary: The Architecture and Design of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown & Associates*, organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2001, and as the curatorial consultant for *Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture*, a major exhibition of the architect's work organized by the Vitra Design Museum in 2012, currently on world tour with venues in Rotterdam, Oslo, London, Taipei and San Diego. Most recently he co-curated *Experiments in Environment: The Halprin Workshops, 1966-71* (with Sarah Herda and Ellen Alderman, 2014) for the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, as well as *Venturi's Grandmother: Patterns for Production* for the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia (with Kathryn Heisinger & others, 2014). He is co-editor of *Crafting a Modern World: The Architecture and Design of Antonin and Noemi Raymond* (with Kurt Helfrich, 2006), and co-author of *The Houses of Louis I. Kahn* (with George Marcus, 2013), the first comprehensive study of the architect's house designs.