

## Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture

Exhibition at London Design Museum  
London, UK, 9 July - 12 October 2014

*Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture* is a consequent review and historic summary of Louis I. Kahn's life, 20 years after the last exhibition about him<sup>1</sup>. This exhibition, compiling the main works and research projects of Kahn, is a full experience that allows the public to get to know the life of one of the most important American architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>.

The starting point of the exhibition is a chronological list of projects (1926-1974) of Kahn, entailing his works as a design consultant, unbuilt and constructed projects as well as urban plans, publications and exhibition material, that reveal a professional life full of ups and downs.

The core of the exhibition is divided into six different topics: "City. Philadelphia as urban laboratory", "House. Regional planning", "Science. The world as structure", "Eternal present. Ruins and archetypes", "Grounding. Earth, water, wind, light" and "Group form. The logic of assembly". The first one, "City. Philadelphia as urban laboratory", is dedicated to the urban plans of the city where Kahn lived, studied and maintained his office. He was a pioneer with radical and visionary concepts for the reconstruction of the inner city of Philadelphia, with reasonable success in the construction of his ideas. Showing plans, perspective drawings and conceptual schemes, this part of the exhibition shows the dedication of Kahn to his own city's future.

Followed by "House. Regional planning", the public enter into a differently scaled realm of Kahn's architecture in Philadelphia, since all of his houses were constructed in and around the city. Study drawings with colors, schemes and annotations are revealed in this section, demonstrating the importance of the house for Kahn, and how he always has envisioned it as an institution. The exhibition also offers a unique opportunity to appreciate a partial true scale replica of the window ledge with a bench of the Norman and Doris Fisher House (1960-1967, Hatboro, USA).

From the houses, the exhibition continues to "Science. The world as structure" where one can assist to the Kahn's analogy between architecture and natural sciences. The public can find drawings of geometric

studies relating the structure of the building to science, with the ultimate result being the project (unbuilt) of the City Tower (designed in collaboration with Anne Tyng, 1952-1957, Philadelphia, USA) whose structure directly evokes the DNA formula. This part ends with the comparison between drawings and the timber models of the Alfred Newton Richards Medical Research and Biology Buildings (1957-1965, Philadelphia, USA), the Library and Dining Hall at Phillips Exeter Academy (1965-1972, New Hampshire, USA) and the Yale Center for British Art (1969-1977, New Haven, USA), where one can see the development of Kahn's new alternative ways of building with concrete.

Controlling concrete and receiving major commissions for significant projects promoted Kahn to the "Eternal present. Ruins and archetypes". With influence from Rome and its solid and timeless constructions, Kahn was able to endorse the meaningful mass and weight of architectural buildings such as Sher-e-Bangla Nagar (1962-1983, Dhaka, Bangladesh), Hurva Synagogue (1967-1974, Jerusalem, Israel), Indian Institute Management (1962-1974, Ahmedabad, India), Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs (1966-1972, New York, USA, unbuilt) or the Mikveh Israel

Synagogue (1961-1972, unbuilt, Philadelphia, USA). Kahn's clever use of concrete in each of his projects is well represented in this section through the use of different materials in models and drawings.

Apart from the aesthetics of the building, Kahn was also concerned with the elements that surround every construction, which led us to the "Grounding. Earth, water, wind, light" part, where we can find the best representative projects designed by him, related to nature. This is seen through his utilization of colorful expressive sketches of projects: The General Motors Exhibit at the 1964 World's Fair (1960-1961), the Salk Institute for Biological Studies (1959-1965, La Jolla, USA) and the Kimbell Art Museum (1966-1972, Fort Worth, USA).

The final segment, "Group form. The logic of assembly", closes the travelling around of Kahn's professional life with the understanding of the logic behind each building. Besides the factors already discussed, Kahn conceived space in various ways compared to the Modern Movement ideas, which created hierarchy within the overall form, distinguishing "servant" and "served" spaces, turning each building into a unique and varying experience for the individual. Taking into consideration the surrounding environment, timelessness and people, it results in the creation of exclusive ambiances whereby Kahn exposes the true materiality of concrete, timber and glass construction. The First Unitarian Church and School building (1959-1969, Rochester, USA), Fine Arts Center (1961-

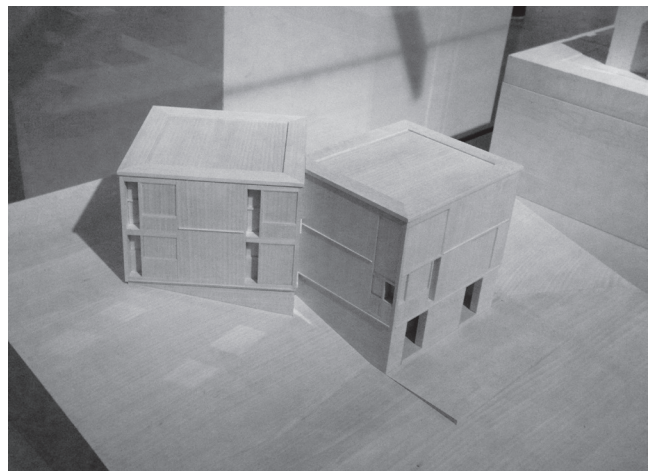
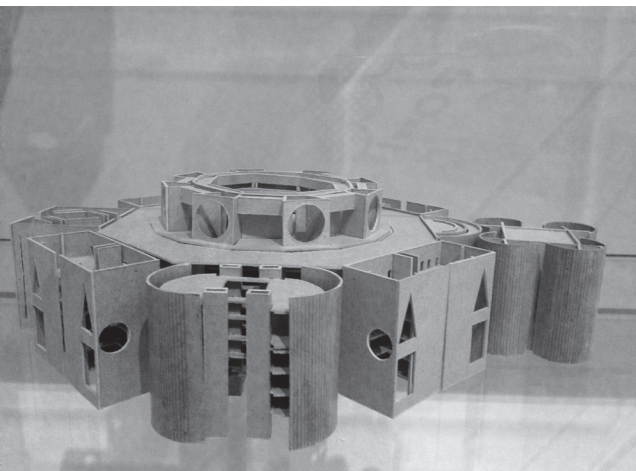
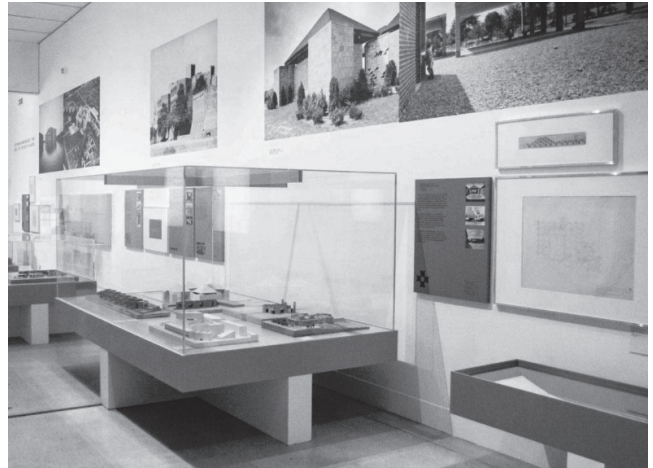


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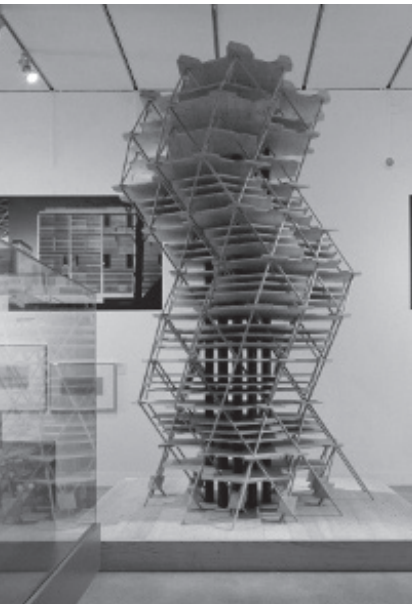


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1973, Fort Wayne, USA), Eleanor Donnelley Erdman Hall (1960-1965, Bryn Mawr, USA) and Jewish Community Center (1954-1959, New Jersey, USA) prove this.

The exhibition *Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture* allows the public to understand each dimension of Kahn's work, concluding that each concern is connected to and belongs to a whole. The elements presented in the exhibition are able to give a general view of his method of designing, as well as an understanding of the powerful influence of each building without seeing them in person. All of this is complemented by a catalog<sup>3</sup> that goes deeper into these themes, with essays justifying the importance of Kahn's work – the perfect complement to an inspiring and powerful exhibition.

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#### Notes

- 1 *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*. Curators: David B. Brownlee and David G. DeLong. Between 20 October 1991 and 1 February 1994, the exhibition was featured in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Museum of Modern Art (Gunma), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Kimbell Art Museum and the Wexner Center for the Arts (Ohio).
- 2 The exhibition is a cooperation between the Vitra Design Museum, the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and the NAI part of The New Institute, Rotterdam. Between 7 September 2012 and 5 November 2017, the exhibition was at the NAI, the Vitra Design Museum, the Oslo National Museum, the London Design Museum, the Taipei Museum of Fine Art, the Bellevue Arts Museum, the San Diego Museum of Art, the Kimbell Art Museum and The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia.
- 3 Mateo Kries, Jochen Eisenbrand, Stanislaus von Moos (ed.), *Louis Kahn – The Power of Architecture*, Weil am Rhein, Vitra Design Museum, 2013. See the Book Review section of this issue.