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Summaries in English

Louis I. Kahn – an erratic block in the streambed of Modern Architecture

by Bernhard Hoesli (See page 794)

At the beginning of the fifties Louis I. Kahn was over fifty years old, when he gradually became noticed by professional architects. His personality and work emerged like a mountain range that suddenly becomes visible when the weather changes. Or they could be compared to a rock formation that slowly emerges into view as the sea covering it ebbs away. Its outline, extent, structure and material only gradually become recognizable. Then suddenly it is as if it had always been there.

Thus the emergence of Louis Kahn was both slow and sudden; it seemed surprising, unexpected and as if perfectly natural, not only in Europe but also in the USA. It was a signal. He was, to be sure, known to a small circle of colleagues and students in Philadelphia and at Yale University in New Haven – to the initiated, as it were. He was also rather like a hermit, of whom we occasionally hear reports, a man whose time had not yet come. He had built but little.

In 1957 Louis I. Kahn, at the age of 56, abruptly impinged on the consciousness of architects with his lab towers on a new biology building for the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Born in 1901, graduated in 1924, Louis Kahn was trained in the best architectural school in America in the tradition of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, the Parisian tradition of the 19th century, which lingered on in Philadelphia. Letarouilly, Guadet and Choisy were his architectural forebears. "Vers une Architecture" was then one year old. Kahn's professional training had come to an end when a revolutionary new architecture began in Europe.

In 1928/29 during a European tour – which took him to his Baltic birthplace and to Italy – Kahn scarcely took any notice of the New Architecture. We regard this as the classical period of Modern Architecture, but all Kahn saw was Paestum, the Villa Hadriana in Tivoli, Siena, San Gimignano.

In the inter-war years, when the new movement, promoted first by the Museum of Modern art in New York and then by Gropius and Breuer of Harvard, made its appearance in the USA, Kahn stood strangely aside. For nearly a decade, after 1945, when Mies van der Rohe was perfecting the potentialities of the Chicago School and his spirit, reduced to practical commercial terms, was dominating American architecture, Kahn was at work as if enveloped in a cocoon.

Louis Kahn emerges in a time of transition – and Modern Architecture suddenly seems questionable and finished. Now, in 1974, it is already difficult to realize what that period was like. In the decade between 1950 and 1960 a frontier was crossed; on this side it is no longer possible to imagine a continuous linear development of Modern Architecture – indeed it seems that the concept has become useless and that the very idea of the modern no longer answers to any need. At any rate, the tradition of the architecture of the 20th century appears to be more complicated than our familiar notion of orthodoxy would have it.

At the CIAM Congress in 1953 at Aix-en-Provence the first voices were raised calling for a new approach to the architecture of the 20s and 30s:

"Vers une Architecture" no longer sufficed, and the "Ville Radieuse" had lost its magic. A new architectural climate was announced in 1954 in the manifesto of the New Brutalism.

It was a time of transition in which architects had access to an inheritance but no longer trusted it; they had mastered the techniques, but the techniques could no longer inspire. Increasingly the work of architects became private statements or commentary on precedents, as with Philip Johnson. Thus architecture was bound to become criticism of architecture – or to be a desperate attempt to break free into a redefinition of architecture.

A new "generation" of architects had appeared which was separated by an intermediate one from the founders of Modern Architecture and which was bound to look back on these founders as historical figures – as forming just another period style.

Louis Kahn emerged in this milieu and seemed both central and apart. This became quite palpable at the very last CIAM Congress in Otterloo in 1959. He stood aside in relation to everything pertaining to Modern Architecture – but he was in the centre when questions were asked concerning the substance, the nature, of the architectural.

In the work of Louis Kahn, without preparation, unexpected, there appears something primordial, archetypal: the old familiar – and timeless – elements, Wall, Pillar, Vault, Square, Circle, Prism, Cylinder, Pyramid, are used as if for the first time and presented replete with new meaning. The possible connections among the elements are in the same way seen afresh and reformulated. People had said: Form follows function. But Louis Kahn said: Form evokes function: a formula that nowadays hardly seems provocative and whose liberating effect can be understood. Kahn's ideas grow directly out of uncontaminated substance.

Just as Le Corbusier, 40 years before, opened up a new approach to one basis of architecture, construction, by conceptualizing the skeleton structure, so Louis Kahn has shown how the other basis of architecture, function, can be conceptualized. Herein consists the exemplary meaning of his distinction between "serving spaces" and "served spaces". In this distinction, functions, evaluations and spaces are interrelated. In this way "functionalistic" thinking in architecture can be overcome – without neglecting function, as has happened in nearly all attempts to break clear of functionalism.

This renders us free to apply new insights into function in architecture and to realize new demands, such as "participation" in planning. It is neither easy to distinguish and to designate functions nor is it enough to assume that the allowing of a building to fulfil its purpose determines the character of the building. Why? Because only a system of values enables us to distinguish types of function and because neither the intended purpose nor the future function of a building can determine the process of its creation.

Louis Kahn reminds us of this in his work, and he shows that the system of values lies outside the realm of the architectural, i.e., outside construction, production, fulfilment of purpose and design. And he shows that this system of values comes at the beginning of the architect's work.

Louis Kahn's work also reminds us that a building is not the solution of a problem, but a proposal for a solution. The building cannot be related like an extrapolation to its causes; it is a thesis.

Finally, Louis Kahn's work makes us ask

ourselves about the meaning of life. His work forces everyone to question his relationship to the past, to the temporal and to history. He is grounded in the ever fresh tradition of the Ecole des Beaux Arts; he builds on what he has seen of Egyptian ruins, Greek and especially Roman antiquity, and Romanesque art, and he draws on the heritage of Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe; on the foundations and with the resources of his own age Kahn created an alternative to the Modern style in architecture. This has nothing to do with motifs.

Does not his work make us ask: what is "past"? Does it not say that a thing is dead and gone only when it leaves us indifferent. But whatever enhances life and effects change is part of the present – no matter how far back is its date of creation. Old does not mean outdated. Wherever something effectual breaks free, that is now. History as the present. A ruin, an excavated city, can be productive, even if we do not know who built it and what its function was.

In the work of Louis Kahn, periods, having overcome "time", merge. He, however, died as he lived. Alone. ■

The international organizations and architecture: a great hope

by Henri Stierlin
(See page 821)

Ever since the creation of the League of Nations and the great competition initiated at Geneva in 1926 for the building of the Palace of Nations, buildings for international institutions have given rise to high architectural aspirations. It was expected that, under the aegis of international bodies, there would be erected buildings that would renew the architectural idiom. People had faith in the creation of "monuments dedicated to peace and concord among all men", as the idea was expressed in the rather high-flown rhetoric of the time.

From the start, these hopes were undermined. The elimination of the plan submitted by Le Corbusier was a farce which augured ill for the future of international building projects. Le Corbusier's daring project would have powerfully furthered the cause of modern architecture. And if Geneva now possessed this building (which would certainly have been the masterpiece of the architect of Ronchamp, of La Tourette or of the Unité d'Habitation), it is clear that the League of Nations Palace would be a much stronger point of attraction than the edifice put up in 1933.

Let's look at the facts. A preliminary stand by the forces of reaction sufficed to smother the modern movement. It was a sobering object lesson for the impenitent dreamers who had set their sights too high, not realizing that compromise was going to be institutionalized by the international organizations as a method of government.

In short, international architecture got off to a bad start even before the Second World War. But where are we today when the headquarters of international bodies are proliferating in Geneva and New York, in Paris and Strasbourg, in Brussels and Moscow?

"Temples of Peace?"

In order to cope with this difficult question which concerns us Swiss especially (since Geneva is the site of the largest number of international offices), it has seemed interesting to examine the leading recent buildings dedicated to international purposes.

What are coming into existence are "temples of peace", or at least that is what they are presumed to

be. The fact remains that architects, called upon to build for bodies of negotiators, might create something more than merely a rationalized office block.

But where is the borderline between the architect's need to realize a building programme and the often unavowed desire to erect a prestige monument?

In other words, the choice is open between functional asceticism—making a machine for resolving international conflicts—and an emblematic architecture incarnating all men's latent longing for beauty, solemnity and splendour. Which do we want: a cybernetic or a ceremonious architecture, one that is cerebral or lyrical, rational or exalting?

This is the question we can rightfully ask ourselves. And an examination of specific projects ought to permit us to draw definite conclusions. However, the choice is not so simple. If the building is on a monumental scale, this may derive as much from the enormous volume entailed by an excessively large programme as from a sense of grandeur inspired by a big-scale building. If the building is sumptuous, this may derive from the use of rare or costly materials, or it may stem from the vastness of the spans. If the building represents an artistic experiment, this may derive from the perfection of the building's proportions, the originality of its articulations, or from the pomp of its decorations.

A heterogeneous complex

To get back to the project of Le Corbusier, which scandalized the authorities responsible for judging the League of Nations competition, it was incontestably revolutionary: vast tracts on elevated piling, main auditorium in the form of a shell, of concrete, but displaying a high degree of elegance; in short, a style, rationalistic on a grand scale but without grandiloquence.

The building could have been a guide-post, a focus for an experimental district in Geneva integrating all the international buildings erected over half a century. It could have been a manifesto for 20th century architecture.

Instead of that we now have a profoundly heterogeneous conglomeration, some projects successful, to be sure, but others failures, banalities, aside from a certain pomposity due to the financial resources lavished on them.

If we have decided to present in this Issue some of the major projects in this field, we have not necessarily done so in order to focus on a number of successes. The fact remains that certain buildings, devoted to international functions, possess both grandeur and charm. ■

The "artistic contributions" in the buildings of the international organizations

An interview with René Berger, Director of the Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts, Lausanne.
(See page 867)

The various member countries of international organizations generally make it a point of honour to participate in the artistic decoration of the headquarters buildings. This makes the problem exceptionally complex, since the contributions come from such widely different sources and vary so greatly in style. The architect, in most cases, cannot directly participate in the choice and application of these "artistic contributions".

It is easy to understand that under these conditions there is great risk of conflict between architect and artist. That is why we have decided to consult an authority on the subject: M. René Berger, Director of the Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts in Lausanne, an internationally recognized expert on modern art.

René Berger regards an "artistic contribution" to an international headquarters building as something appended to the building for prestige purposes. It remains an adventitious element. And the gifts, coming from everywhere, are heterogeneous in character. The leading members of the international community want to appear at their best in the building. However, these contributions are not the result of a "decoration" project. Moreover, this term "decoration" is per se dubious, in that it is a product of bourgeois society, as evidenced by the expression "decorative arts".

In reality, in the ancient civilizations, there is a profound unity between the individual work of art and its setting, the building. Whether in Egypt or in Angkor, for example, one can hardly distinguish between the architectural and the decorative aspects. Sculpture or bas-relief is an integral part of the total creation. However, in our culture the dichotomy is so violent that the artistic appendage often seems to be an impertinence – in the original sense of the term, i.e., unclean.

The parts of the building that are reserved for decoration are generally left to the play of chance: wherever there is a "blank" space, one "puts" something. It is an activity of filling in; what is put in the empty space often runs completely counter to the underlying intentions of the architect. It is usually the weak points of the building that are "heightened" by works of art.

There can be noted also a kind of simultaneous perversion of art and architecture: there is introduced into the building a sham museum owing its existence solely to the "big names" assembled in it. The public visits international headquarters buildings like pseudo-galleries. This process can only destroy architecture by focussing attention on a secondary, adventitious element.

In reality, everything happens as if we "were paying for a good conscience" by means of aesthetic adjuncts. The artist is transformed into a star, for only the big stars figure here. The artist becomes a property man. He is recouped.

René Berger sees only one way out of this distressing situation: interdisciplinary integration when programmes are drawn up. Thus there ought to be consulted, besides the architect, sociologists, psychologists and even psychoanalysts, to contribute to the working out of a basic conception. This is the only way not to limit ourselves to a purely rationalist approach, for architecture has never been restricted to the exclusive fulfilment of needs. Certain "hidden dimensions" deserve to be expressed. We have to get in touch with the unconscious. In fact, there are frequent cases in the history of architecture where immediate needs can cease without there resulting any loss of quality. In particular, this is true of medieval Italian cities, which preserve all their charm and their urban authenticity, although defensive considerations no longer matter and there are no traffic problems.

It must not be forgotten that in art there is no work which is not complex: art is multi-dimensional and appeals to many senses. Artistic decor ought to enrich the parameters of architecture. All advertising people know about the "art of persuasion". The artistic decor of a building ought to be convincing.

In a second phase, the realization of the building programme ought to be based on a real collaboration between the architect and the artists. Basing himself on the theory of "open systems", René Berger thinks that all parameters interact in the work of art. What is experienced contains an element of contingency, of risk. That is why excessive planning runs counter to the experience it can propose. There should be built into the work a temporal dimension, an expression of lived experience, for the object that is restricted to its function remains inert.

No more than cosmetics can guarantee vitality (make-up is not youthfulness) can art be a balm for a building.

Recorded by Henri Stierlin ■

Ausstellungskalender

Aarau	Galerie 6	Max Hegetschweiler	24. 8.–21. 9.
Ascona	Galerie AAA	Hans Erni, Luzern	31. 5.–18. 7.
Basel	Kunstmuseum	Lukas Cranach	15. 6.– 8. 9.
Bellelay	Abbatiale de Bellelay	Jean-François Comment	29. 6.–15. 9.
Bern	Kunstmuseum	Unbekanntes Kunstmuseum – 2. Ausstellung	Ende Juni–Anfang Aug.
	Gewerbemuseum im Kornhaus	Tierbücher aus vier Jahrhunderten	Juli/August
Bülach	Sigristenkeller, Galerie und Kellertheater	Freilicht-Plastikausstellung mit Robert Lienhard	9. 5. bis Ende Okt.
Freiburg	Museum für Kunst und Geschichte	Mittelalterliche französische Plastik aus Bordeaux und dem Bordelais	ab 9. Juli
Glarus	Galerie Beat Gähwiler Crazy House	Luginbühl, Lohse u. a.	August
Heiden	Kursaal-Galerie	Josef Ebnöther, Herbert Albrecht, Malerei, Graphik, Plastik	28. 6.–17. 8.

Lausanne	Musée des Arts décoratifs	Bijoux, objets et dessins d'orfèvres contemporains	Juni–Ende Aug.
Luzern	Kunstmuseum	Österreichische Kunst zu Beginn des Jahrhunderts	7. 7.– 8. 9.
Rorschach	Heimatismuseum im Kornhaus	Albert Saner, St. Gallen, Schiffe	14. 7.–11. 8.
Solothurn	Museumsfoyer	Sammlungszuwachs der Kunstabteilung	Juli/August
St. Gallen	Historisches Museum	«Kunst als tägliches Erlebnis»	6. 7.–25. 8.
Thun	Kunstsammlung der Stadt Thun	Wilhelm Schmid, Bré (1892–1971)	22. 6.– 4. 8.
Zürich	Kunsthaus	Kunst in Polen – Von der Gotik bis heute	30. 5.–11. 8.
	Helmhaus	Die Schweiz im Bild – Bild der Schweiz	30. 6.– 4. 8.
	Modern Art Roswitha Haftmann	Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Holzschnitte, Lithographien	22. 5. bis Aug.
	Galerie Bettina	Neueste Werke von den Künstlern der Galerie	Juli