

Silence: louis i. kahn's philosophy of silence

Life



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Introduction

Silence, for many people, is a very simple idea. You have to keep quiet in libraries and churches, so libraries and churches are silent. However, is there any way to create silence with architecture? Of many architects who work on the topic, one architect stands out – his name is Louis Kahn.

Louis Isadore Kahn (1901-1974, born Itze-Leib Schmuilowsky) is perhaps one of the most recognised architects throughout history. Masterpieces he created are marvelled and praised since their creation, some as great as the national parliament building of Bangladesh, some as small as a simple changing room of a swimming pool. It was a long journey of self-discovery, and discovery of the true nature of silence.

In this essay, three aspects of Kahn's philosophy in silence are examined – silence in the form, silence in material and silence of the mind. Each aspect is explained with sources from Kahn's writings. A building project is then examined to demonstrate how that particular idea is incorporated into the design.

Some of Kahn's words are abstruse and spiritual, while others solid and practical. In this essay, many of the architect's own words are quoted directly, both to be faithful to the essence of his philosophy and to allow the reader to feel his ideas for themselves, which Kahn strongly suggested in various writings.

It is hard to categorise Louis Kahn into any architecture styles. Modernism? His designs are too classical. Brutalism? He focused more on the form than the function. Louis Kahn's works are what they are, because they are.

Louis Kahn's philosophy of silence

Of all the architects throughout history, it appears that Louis Kahn had a special fascination with silence, almost an obsession with the state of it. Many of his works exhibit a strong sense of silence; however, none of them has a sign at the door saying “no shouting” or “silence”. This has to do with how he designed them, his philosophy of Silence. It is the mental suggestion to be silent inside his buildings that made them so unique.

Origin

Many famous architects developed their own style rapidly in the infancy of their career, from either natural talents or inspirations by other architects. This was not the case for Kahn. After graduating with a degree in Architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, Kahn worked as a drafter for several architects between 1924 and 1932. During his early years working in architecture offices, Kahn struggled to find his style and commissions.

The beginning of the 20th Century saw the rise of Modernism in architecture. Sleek, glass-clad skyscrapers grew like wild grass. The whole world had plunged into a new world full of technological wonders and marvels. Kahn tried to move with the trend, but he did not feel like it.

Things began to change when Kahn got the chance to travel. In 1928, the would-be architect visited Europe. Instead of classical strongholds or

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modernists buildings, Kahn had his interests in medieval fortress of Carcassonne and castles in Scotland. [1] Perhaps the most impactful moment in Kahn's life arrived in 1951. He was invited to stay at the American Academy in Rome, as an architect in residence.

That was a pivotal moment in his life. Throughout the year Kahn travelled, visiting ancient ruins and monuments of the once mighty empires of old. One can clearly see the influence and impact of ancient architecture on Kahn from his numerous sketches made along the way. The monumentality and timelessness qualities of the ancient world burned a deep mark in Kahn's mind. His experiences gave his definition of beauty:

It (beauty) is a total harmony you feel without knowing, without reservation, without criticism, without choice. [2]

When Kahn returned to the US in the following year, he was a new man. His goal now was to build modern buildings with a feel and presence of ancient ruins[3]. With the team of architects he gathered when he started his office in 1947, Kahn finally began designing buildings of his own style, not someone else's.

What Is Silence?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, silence is the state of not making or accompanied by any sound. To put it simply, silence is analogous to quietness or absence of sound. However, to Kahn, it is not so simple. Kahn philosophy of the world is dominated by the dichotomy of measurable and unmeasurable. Silence, by its nature, is unmeasurable. It is like imaginary numbers in mathematics. It lies nowhere on the line of real numbers, but it

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very much exists. In his famous lecture at ETH, Zurich in 1969, titled Silence and Light, Kahn explained his interpretation of silence, “ Silence is not very, very quiet. It is something which you may say is lightless – darkless.” [4]

Unmeasurable is absolute. It is universally true and no matter how it is viewed, it is still constant. Measurable, however, is relative. Every word in the dictionary is relative to one another. Even the word as absolute as ‘ absolute’ is relative to ‘ relative’ and ‘ constant’ is relative to ‘ variable’. This is a natural inability of human language. As Kahn puts it, “ measurable is only a servant of the unmeasurable, that everything that man makes must be fundamentally unmeasurable.” [5]

To Kahn, silence is his desire to express. However, He needed a measurable means, as silence is unmeasurable. Then he found his measurable equivalence – light. Light is, as he puts it, the giver presence and the maker of materials. Through light and shadows (the relative opposite of light), Kahn is able to express silence through the form, as defined by the threshold of light and shadow, and materials.

Silence of the Form

Silence is not absence; Kahn had made this quite clear. A barren landscape is not silence, just nothingness. The silence of the form of a building is the embodiment of a harmony of systems and a sense of order. [6]

Kahn is very keen on the idea of Order. It is unmeasurable after all, just like Silence. For example, the grid of columns of an ancient Greek temple gives a sense of order, but it is very hard to describe the feeling of order conclusive.

The only way to understand it is to see and feel it. Kahn had this to say about it:

I tried to find what Order is. ... Every time I wrote something, I felt it wasn't quite enough. ... I stopped by not saying what it is, just saying, " Order is."
[7]

With order comes the sense of joy and wonder. Joy is intrinsic and instinctive. To Kahn, Joy is the essence of feeling. One feels either joy or nothing at all. It is the essence and motivation of creativity. The world is like water without any shape or direction, while Joy is the wind that creates ripples and waves. From Kahn's point of view, it is impossible to create anything without joy. [8]

Wonder is a higher level of feeling, but it is still instinctive. Upon seeing something of order, of harmony (words are so limited for unmeasurable qualities), Kahn thinks the first word one would say is simply, " Ah." [9] It carries no meaning and information. Yet it expresses such a strong feeling.

From wonder spawns realisation. It requires no extra effort in thinking to realize order. It is simply something supposed to happen and its existence is definite, no matter one sees it or not. Kahn had sublimed Form to a higher level. It is intangible and only exists in one's mind. The form is the product of realisation, of intuition. It is fundamentally unmeasurable. However, forms in one's mind have no use. No one can describe it accurately for it is unmeasurable.

As Kahn puts it, Form is ' what' and Design is ' how'. Design is the physical manifestation of the form, the measurable expression of the unmeasurable.

It defines the shape and space of the form and gives a physical existence.

[10]

The Trenton Bath House is a pivotal project in Kahn's career. It was his first notable project to apply his newfound interest in monumentality and timelessness. It marked a drastic evolution in Kahn's style from modernism to his own approach to architecture.

Neither located at Trenton, Philadelphia nor a bathhouse, it was part of a larger development project of a Jewish community centre for Delaware Valley, Philadelphia. Four miles from Trenton, the community centre was supposed to be much larger in scale. The only built part of the building now serves as the changing room for the swimming pool next to it. It fell into disrepair as the usage of it declined, and was proposed to be demolished in 1996 due to safety concerns to the structural integrity, much ironic to Kahn's application of the idea of timelessness. Luckily, the appearance of the building in the 2003 academy award nominated documentary *My Architect: A Son's Journey* bolstered its profile in the public. By 2011, it was completely renovated with funds provided by Ewing Township (owner of the building since 2007) and New Jersey Historic Trust. [11]

As Kahn described it in his interview in April 1970, he was in the period of excitement about the thought of the meaning of such making of spaces. [12]

Functionality is the idea, or in Kahn's term, the form of the project. As Kahn described it, it was a very clear and simple problem for him to address, giving him much freedom in designing the building. [13] In the infancy of Kahn's new design philosophy, he wanted to create absolute purity and no

redundancy in space. Of course, this was Kahn's own interpretation of redundancy. According to his account at the interview, he admitted that the community centre was never built as The Trenton Young Men's Hebrew Association, the client of this project, deemed it too expensive. Compare to the programme from the client, he had created many more spaces, which he had to invent uses for them. Kahn argued that the extra rooms would have proven to be necessary. [14]

Silence in the form is purity. Kahn favoured using of geometric shapes to express the form. In the case of the bathhouse, it is squares and triangles. Simplicity in form is the silence of the spaces. Silence lies between light and shadow, created by the form of the building. The bath house consists of four rooms arranged in a simple cruciform shape. Each room has its function and their porosity correspond to them. The entrance is enclosed and shielded from the public, but once inside, it is opened to the central open-air atrium. The porch is not surrounded by any walls but an intangible boundary created by the shadow of the pyramidal roof.

The rooms are each covered by a pyramidal timber roof with a glazed oculus at the top. According to Kahn, he had great admiration for Frank Lloyd Wright's sweeping roof that defines the boundary of the building as well as shedding water in the most direct and simple way. However, for him, Kahn wished to use the roof to show the independence of each room. [15] One roof is for one room, not one roof for all rooms. Each corner of the roof is supported by a thick hollow concrete column. The roofs sit on thin steel supports that are connected to the column below, resulting in a floating appearance at a distance.

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Owing to the thick hollow concrete columns that support the roof and provide services and toilet spaces, the walls are aligned to either side of it. This creates gaps between the roof and wall, which greatly favours Kahn in his manipulation of “shades and shadows”. Considering the poor dynamic range of the human eye (in photographic terms), Kahn deepened the contrast of the seeping daylight and the great shadow of the pyramidal roof above. [16] With the purity in form, silence is created by the light and shadow casting on it.

Silence in Material

A major difference between Kahn's philosophy and minimalism is the different approach to using materials. Minimalism requires the manipulation of materials to achieve silence. Masonry walls are covered by rendering and marble are polished to gloss. To Kahn, this is a violation of the material itself.

From wonder comes the realization. It is the understanding of certain nature of something. For example, the nature of a school is to educate. Hence, when an architect designs a school, he should design it to educate, not to sell or to constrain. Kahn gave a very lively personify example about materials: You say to brick, “What do you want, brick?” Brick says to you, “I like an arch.” If you say to brick, “Arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel over an opening. What do you think of that, brick?” Brick says, “I like an arch.” [17] Kahn is against materials manipulation and his rationale is clear. To him, a material only performs its best when it is used by its nature. It is his philosophy that the nature of the materials should be honoured and glorified, instead of assigning it to an inferior job and consequently losing their characteristics. [18]

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Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban or the National Parliament House is the central building of the Bangladesh Parliament located in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. It was one of the most ambitious projects throughout Kahn's career, and it is a perhaps the finest manifestation of Kahn's attitude towards materials.

Despite being a massive complex design, the building is quite simple in its form and materials. Kahn had kept faithful to the raw appearance of the materials he chose; however, it was also a consideration in economics and logistics. Kahn wished embrace and honour the place, which he described as " a decision coming from commonality that you choose a place out of all places to build." [19]

In past projects, Kahn employed building techniques that require skilled workers and machineries. However, such requirement could not be fulfilled in this project. Bangladesh was one of the poorest countries at that time. [20] For this, Kahn had to work around the problems of the absence of advance machinery by making good use of the plentiful amount of labour which was available. [21] Contrary to common belief that the concrete panels were cast off-site, they were in fact on site with manual methods. Marble stripes were inserted as an inset to cover the pour points and acted as a drip moulding for the exterior. The result is a monolithic monumental building with concrete walls in a regular grid of white lines.

There is no fancy decoration inside and outside of the building. Nature itself is the ornament. Rain and sunlight, to Kahn, is the nature of the place, and so he should honour them. Unlike buildings at the same period, the interior

of the building is opened to the exterior through gigantic oculi. When asked about the issue of the monsoon rain during the interview in 1969, he said, "...the rain comes in because it's supposed to come in." [22]

Perfection seen in Kahn's other projects seems largely abandoned in the construction of the National Parliament House. The architect's perfectionism was still there, as proved by his unannounced visit to the construction site and expressed his distaste for the contractors' deviations from his drawings. [23] Kahn realised that the only way to perfection is to embrace the nature of the materials. With a strong and stubborn material like concrete, the only way is to let it does in its ways. In the end, Kahn concluded that the perfection of material is its imperfection.

The beauty of what you create comes if you honour the material for what it really is. [24]

Silence is the nature. The silence of the material is the nature of it. The only way to express its nature of the material is to let it does in its own way, nothing more.

Silence of the Mind

Wonder, Order, Light; Louis Kahn wrote a lot about them. However, there is a term that keeps recurring in his philosophy – intuition. It is Kahn's belief that architects should rely on their own intuition, not the clients'. In Kahn's view, intuition is the record of senses and the record of the process of recording it. He considered it the greatest gift, as it is the " most personal sense that a singularity has". [25]

For example, an architect saw the ruins of an ancient Greek temple and he felt greatness. What he felt became his intuition. Hence, when he wanted to express greatness, he would design a building with a great hall of columns. Intuition is a tool to express and the trigger for creative design. In addition, it rationalise intuitive acts with good reasons for clients to accept. It is hard to describe intuition; only through design can an architect express it. [26]

One of Louis Kahn's most renowned projects and universally praised as a masterpiece, the Salk Institute for Biological Science is one of the best embodiment of Kahn's philosophy. Sitting on top of a short mountain, the building overlooks the horizon of the Pacific. The institute is made up of two buildings, one to the north and the other to the south. The centre is occupied by the iconic square of bare concrete and a stream of water. The west edge of the square is slightly sunken, so when it is viewed from the entrance, it would look as if the stream of water is flowing into the Pacific, much like an infinity pool.

The intuition of the project is the place of happening as described in his lecture at ETH in 1969. According to Jack McAllister, the supervising architect of the project, instead of trying to suppress the undesirable, Kahn incorporated them into the building. For example, scars and marks of form works of the concrete walls were exposed intentionally. Through this, Kahn wished to honour the processes of making the building by making them visible. [27]

Learnt from the experience of the Richards Medical Research Laboratories at the University of Pennsylvania, Kahn had refined his philosophy of light.

Before the Richards, the architect would want as much sunlight as possible. Now, the intuition is to have enough sunlight and enough space. Moderation was the new intuition. The structure is the giver of light, and so he used structure to control sunlight. The alternating pattern of positive and negative spaces creates the rhythm of 'light, no light, light, no light'. [28]

Conclusion

Some consider Louis Kahn to be an artist, and architecture is his canvas. Indeed, he began his life in architecture with art, but he is no artist. He is more like a philosopher, with so many spiritual ideas that he wanted to express through his designs.

Considering the metaphor of a painting, the light would be the paint on the palette and Kahn's intuition is the brush. The beauty of his subject is silence, the painting itself is the building. Silence is unmeasurable, indescribable. Only by feeling – touching and seeing – can one understand the architect's philosophy.

Kahn had travelled a long way to find his universe of silence and his philosophy of Silence is not merely simple ideas of quietness, rather a complex ideology developed throughout the architect's life. The Trenton Bathhouse demonstrates the silence of the form with its pyramidal roofs and monolithic walls, the materiality of the National Parliament House of Bangladesh expresses silence of the materials, and finally the Salk Institute embodies of silence of the mind with shadows and textures.

There could be another 4000 words about Kahn's silence, but it will never be enough. Just stop here and say, " Silence is."

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