

VOLUME ZERO: Louis Kahn and the Arts United Center

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*Introduction*¹

It is dangerous to ask an architect to talk about Louis Kahn. It's akin to asking a child to give a calm and understated dissertation on what makes Superman special. Eventually, you find yourself sounding like a hopeless romantic and an amateur philosopher, both of which I will likely do here. So, instead of trying to articulate the impact I think Kahn had on the architectural profession, I have decided to take this opportunity to address a different matter.

My goal with this essay isn't to convince you that the Arts United Center, located at 303 East Main Street in downtown Fort Wayne, is architecturally significant. My aim here is much simpler. I want you to think this building is beautiful. You don't have to like it. You don't have to appreciate its architectural pedigree. But you should be able to appreciate its beauty. And, like so many things, a large part of its appeal rests in the story it tells, a story that stars an awkward architect that we invited into our community in 1960 to help us become a better version of ourselves. More specifically, it's a story that illustrates the magic of our arts campus, the audacity of its vision, and the impact it continues to have on our city.

Architecture is an odd thing. It is the only artform that is imposed onto the general public. For most people, if you want to see a painting or attend a concert or read a novel you simply seek these things out. Conversely, if you want to shield yourself from art, you can easily become insulated from these things entirely. But architecture is different. It is aggressive in its presence and relentless in its desire to stage the experiences and memories that makeup our everyday lives. This reality is the starting point in understanding Louis Kahn.

¹ This essay is an excerpt from a presentation the author gave at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art on September 27, 2017 to supplement two exhibits: (1) *Becoming Present: Louis I. Kahn and the Arts United Center* and (2) *On the Pursuit of Perfections: The Legacy Architecture of Louis I Kahn in Our City*. Both exhibits were on display through the summer of 2017 and focused on providing a detailed account of the planning, design, and construction of the Arts United Center. The hope with this presentation at the time was to provide a unique perspective regarding the importance of this building, one that was not represented in the supporting exhibits.

The biography commonly given for Kahn is that he was born in Estonia in 1901, moved to Philadelphia at age four, and received a Beaux-Arts education at the University of Pennsylvania under the direction of Paul Cret.² This is all true. But, like any good superhero, the genesis story is more interesting.

One afternoon, when Kahn was three years old, he became interested in the glowing coals burning in the family fire. Captivated by the light they seemed to emit, he reached in. The embers shifted and caught his clothes on fire, burning him badly. The near-death experience left his face scarred, permanent markings that would serve as a constant reminder of his lifelong infatuation with light.

Having heard that story many times as an architectural student, I'm convinced that this is the moment when he got his magical powers. Like Peter Parker getting bit by a radioactive spider, Kahn's gifts as an architect seems to have been born from this experience, touched by the gods to be the purveyor of light.

Truth be told, Kahn was always different. Different in his approach, in his fashion sense, and in his pursuits. "A great building," he would say, "must begin with the unmeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end, must be unmeasurable."³ His dedication to understanding the responsibility architecture had in producing a metaphysical connection between space and time is what set him apart from his peers and, coincidentally, brought him to Fort Wayne at the height of his career.

² David Brownlee and David De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (Los Angeles: Universe Publishing, 1997), 12-23.

³ Louis Kahn, "Form and Space," in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003) 69.

Generous Egotist

It's important to understand the context surrounding Kahn's time in our community. During the construction of the Arts United Center the American Institute of Architects as well as the Royal Institute of British Architects awarded him with the prestigious Gold Medal, the highest awards offered by the architectural profession. Then, tragically, four months after our building opened, he was found dead in a train station bathroom.

There is another interesting layer to this timeline. In a span of seven years, Kahn completed the construction of five of the greatest buildings of the twentieth century. For an architect that is often criticized for having so few projects realized, it's a feat that will likely never be duplicated.

Immediately prior to being awarded the Fort Wayne commission in February of 1961, he completed the construction of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies (1959) and the Indian Institute of Management (1961). He then would go on to complete the National Assembly Building of Bangladesh (1962), the Phillips Exeter Library (1965), and the Kimbell Arts Museum (1966) while working to complete the Arts United Center in 1973.

Kahn's notoriety during this time cannot be overstated. As he visited our community, as he designed our campus, and as he lectured in the completed rehearsal hall during the building's open house, he was, by a large margin, the most important architect in the world. However, Kahn was a complicated individual and to understand the full spectrum of his personality, there are likely three Kahn's worthy of evaluation: (1) as the master architect, (2) as the conflicted romantic, and (3) as the generous egotist.⁴

No one fit the bill of a "master architect" better than Louis Kahn. It's the persona we most commonly fall in love with and the one every budding designer tries to emulate. In architectural

⁴ Christopher Hawthorne, "The Enduring History of Lou Kahn," *Architect Magazine*, March 2017, 92.

circles, he was more than a just a creative force. He was a teacher, a prophet, a poet... the patron saint of creative integrity. A mythical figure, he became infamous for his ability to mesmerize an audience, not with his answers, but with his curiosities. Part soothsayer, part building-whisperer, he famously had running conversations with buildings.

“You say to brick,” Kahn would say, “What do you want to be, Brick?” And brick says to you, ‘I like an arch.’ And you say to Brick, ‘Look, I want one too, but arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel.’ And then you say, ‘What do you think about that, Brick?’ Brick says, ‘I like an arch.’”⁵ For decades this was the only version of Kahn that was discussed, until 2003.

That was the year Kahn’s illegitimate son, Nathaniel, told the story of the man he knew in the award-winning documentary, *My Architect: A Son’s Journey*. Here, Kahn was emotionally portrayed as a conflicted romantic. While his academic legacy was recognized for its pursuit of truth and clarity, his personal life was secretive and chaotic. His sudden death left behind three families – one with his wife and two with women he had participated in long-term affairs. The movie gave us a new Kahn, one that revealed the complexities of his passion, his drive, and his insecurities.⁶

And then, just this last summer, we were given a third Kahn to consider, one outlined in Wendy Lesser’s book, *You Say to Brick*. Here, as Lesser describes, we see Kahn as a “generous egotist,” someone who wanted others to get as much pleasure out of life and work as he did.⁷

This third iteration of Kahn attempts to explain his creative process and, incidentally, reflects on the type of relationship he had with Fort Wayne.

⁵ Wendy Lesser, *You Say to Brick: The Life of Louis Kahn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) 5.

⁶ Nathaniel Kahn, dir., *My Architect: A Son’s Journey*, DVD (New York: New Yorker Video, 2006).

⁷ Lesser, *You Say to Brick*, 5.

In her book, Lesser continues that, “With many architects – and Louis Kahn was certainly among them – the interplay between these constantly arising difficulties and the architect’s own fertility of imagination is an essential part of the process. Kahn was not an isolated genius who came up with ideas and then supervised their exact construction. He was a collaborator of extraordinary abilities.”⁸ Kahn indeed was an avid collaborator; however, in partnership with clients and colleagues, he was not solely focused on the projects he was commissioned to design but on a broader intellectual journey in which he was constantly seeking answers. Answers he seemed to have found in Fort Wayne.

Society of Rooms

Kahn loved beginnings. He adored the start of a new problem. And the task our community presented him was a wonderfully complicated problem to solve.

Fort Wayne’s Fine Arts Foundation had interviewed some of the most important architects in the world,⁹ requesting that they assist our community in envisioning a multi-phased, multi-building arts campus unlike anything anyone had ever seen. The equation included a performing arts theater, art museum, reception center, office building, lecture hall, art school, ballet school, historical museum, and music hall. At the beginning, the project had numerous moving parts, including the budget, depending on who you asked.

In describing our project during a lecture in 1965 at Yale University, Kahn noted that, “All this had to be in one bundle on one piece of land, and I had to say what it would cost. This is a

⁸ Lesser, *You Say to Brick*, 6.

⁹ Nearly all the major architects of the time were interviewed or contacted, including: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Minoru Yamasaki, Philip Johnson, Edward Durell Stone, and Eero Saarinen. Johnson, who was too busy to respond, suggested Kahn’s name to the committee for consideration.

very ticklish situation for me because I wanted them to want the project first, and then talk about the cost. I knew the plans exceeded very much the cost that the committee had in mind.”¹⁰

For Kahn, the project and the costs were, in some ways, two different problems to solve. One was an issue of architecture and the other of fundraising. It was an instinct he would battle with his entire career.

When his first concept for the center was presented in 1965, Kahn estimated the project costs at \$20 million. Considering this was approximately \$156 million today and almost ten times the assumed budget at the time, the committee was not amused.¹¹ Their displeasure is clearly illustrated in numerous letters sent to his office in Philadelphia, now stored in the project’s archive.

As the budget and scope continued to be revised, moving from ten buildings to eventually one single structure, Kahn was willing to compromise, but he kept fighting for the original vision. His reluctance wasn’t, I think, due to an unwillingness to produce different options for his client, but because he was intellectually allergic to piecemeal revisions to established design solutions. It’s a common instinct for creative geniuses. If the variables for the problem changed, Kahn didn’t want to revise the solution. He wanted to start over. And, throughout his career, he started over a lot. In his mind, it was the only way to ensure a responsible solution would be developed.

You see this dedication to beautiful solutions in the minds of Newton, Einstein, Descartes, and Kahn. These people intimately value, above all things, the importance of asking the right question before considering a viable answer. “If I had an hour to solve a problem,” Einstein once

¹⁰ Louis Kahn, “Lecture at Yale University (1963),” in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 163.

¹¹ Brown, *Louis Kahn in the Midwest*.

said, “I’d spend fifty-five minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about the solution.” Their careers were in a constant pursuit of a universal law, a single equation that would make the world make a little more sense. For Einstein it was relativity; for Kahn it was something he called “volume zero.”

Kahn had an eight-volume set of books summarizing the history of England. He frequently claimed that the first chapter of the first volume was the only one that interested him and he wished desperately he could read volume zero instead. This notion was rooted in a desire to consider a pre-historic context. Architecturally speaking, this idea of “volume zero,” was a search for the essence of form, one that predated modern architecture and, in effect, modern man.¹²

“History could not have started in the places they speak of.” Kahn said. “History preceded this; it just is not recorded. The beauty of architecture is that it deals with the recessions of the mind, from which comes that which is not yet said and not yet made.”¹³

This singular idea is the framework on which Kahn’s portfolio of work rests. You see it in everything he produced. His ongoing obsession with this approach was not simply a hypothetical search for a reduction in form (circles, squares, brick, concrete, etc.), it was a pursuit for a reduction in intrusion. How much could you do with how little? How far could you starve the pallet and still evoke the appropriate emotion or response? And while his buildings are often criticized for being cold or uninviting, Kahn was not as concerned with architecture as sculpture, but architecture as experience – a phenomenon that cannot be evaluated passively.

¹² Brown, *Louis Kahn in the Midwest*.

¹³ John Lobell and Louis I. Kahn, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1979), 54.

To appreciate his buildings requires active participation, to sit in the Ars United Center long enough to see the sun move through the gallery, to hear children gasp at the volume of space, to feel obligated to touch the brick as you walk by. Kahn saw these buildings as a canvas for the natural world, one that was dedicated to servicing humanity at its fundamental core. The question was, how could architecture effectively produce an instinctive relationship with its inhabitants? He would start with the basic idea of the “room.”

Kahn believed that the *room* was the smallest unit of architecture. He argued that our experiences were directly affected by our immediate spatial boundaries (e.g., how a wall meets the ground, or a roof meets the sky) and that each room is different – some tall, some short, some thin, some thick. Each one evoking a different emotion. To him, it was the architect’s responsibility to understand what each room needs, what it wants to be.

He famously proclaimed that, “rooms relate to each other to strengthen their own unique nature. The auditorium wants to be a violin. Its envelope is a violin case. The society of rooms is the place where it is good to learn, good to work, good to live.”¹⁴ This violin metaphor was more than a cute story about our building. It helped illustrate the personality of the differing rooms and laid the groundwork for the experience he was trying to create.

The beauty of the design Kahn conceived for Fort Wayne starts with the notion that our building is perhaps the purist response to his “volume zero” philosophy – one that echoed the pre-historic instincts of basic human nature. Ironically, it also might be the very reason it is so easily dismissed.

¹⁴ Louis Kahn, “The Room, The Street, and Human Agreement (1971),” in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 254.



Fig. 1: Arts United Center. Fort Wayne, Indiana. 1973; view from the entrance, from the southwest. Photo: Craig Kuhner.

Cognitive Architecture

Recently there has been a growing interest in cognitive architecture – a field of research dedicated to understanding how our brains interact with the built environment. From this research, there are numerous examples as to what makes the Arts United Center so fascinating. Here, I would like to highlight three key phenomenon that seem to provide some interesting insight into the common reaction our building gets from casual observers.

The first concept is that of bilateral symmetry, a notion sometimes referred to as an “evolved preference.” Because so much of nature is reliant on symmetry, our brains have been

self-trained to appreciate this as an indicator of natural or healthy objects.¹⁵ What's even more interesting is that things that have bilateral symmetry across the vertical axis, like the primary façade of the Arts United Center, can be processed by our brains much quicker – especially when they are horizontal in proportion.

The human field of vision is rectilinear by nature. It evolved over time to allow us to construct fast, horizontal scans of the savannah in search of predators. Because of this, our brains can scan the horizontal axis of a rectangle just as fast as the vertical – a skill that makes watching widescreen televisions possible.¹⁶ It also makes the facade of the Arts United Center extremely easy for our brains to understand.

The reason it seems so simple, even though there are simpler buildings nearby, is partly because it's design almost perfectly responds to our cognitive instinct to process bilateral information.

The second concept that makes this building unique is its dedication to the presence of formal edges. Humans, by nature, are “wall-hugging” creatures. The official name for this phenomenon is “thigomotaxis” – a preparatory strategy to help a person sense the borders of a space and its escape routes. When these edge conditions become vague, our brains immediately go on high alert. However, when these edges are clear, our subconscious can construct a mental map of the space and instinctively suggest a way forward.¹⁷ We need to inherently feel as though we know where we are going and where we have been.

¹⁵ Justin Hollander and Ann Sussman, *Cognitive Architecture: Designing for How We Respond to the Built Environment* (New York: Rutledge, 2015) 118-123.

¹⁶ Hollander, *Cognitive Architecture*, 97.

¹⁷ Hollander, *Cognitive Architecture*, 23-26.



Fig. 2: Arts United Center. Fort Wayne, Indiana. 1973; interior view of stairway and side entrance. Photo: Craig Kuhner.

Kahn's building not only glorifies these edge conditions, but highlights for us when they become interrupted in hopes we can understand where they will again resume. For example, whenever a brick wall is interrupted with an opening or doorway, a slate threshold continues along the floor. We always know where we are relative to the edge, always clear on where each space begins and where it ends. The building has a habit of constantly reassuring us, subliminally empowering us to move through each space with confidence.

The last notion is humans' infatuation with faces. Our brains don't look out at the world as though all things are equal. We look through an evolutionary filter that prioritizes faces and people. What is also apparent is that, even when an object is not human, a face-like object

engages us emotionally without much mental effort. This subconscious tendency to assemble faces in random objects is called “pareidolia,” and plays a significant role in how our brain understands aesthetics.¹⁸

The automobile industry has spent countless resources trying to better understand this. Consumers tend to buy cars that have a front grille, or a “face,” that mimics a desired personality. We want a car that is tough, confident, mature, or happy. Architecture is no different. We see faces in buildings all the time. Every house a child draws is nothing more than an abstracted face with a triangle head. It’s a way for our brain to quickly process complex structures.

The Arts United Center isn’t simple. Far from it. Its construction is delicate and complicated. It just happens to be an edge-glorifying, bilaterally symmetrical, abstract face – a seemingly random combination of elements that our brain has evolved over time to process at a rapid rate. It’s simple to us because it’s oddly familiar, possessing an ability few buildings have. One that connects us to the built environment through a purely natural bond. It’s an experience that, like any meaningful relationship, seems to epitomize what constitutes as “beautiful.”

Kahn never wrote about any of the cognitive connections between his buildings and human nature. The science was unavailable to him at the time. However, I think there is a strong correlation between these ideas and his “volume-zero” philosophy.

The reason this building feels so simple is because of its ability to efficiently respond to our cerebral instincts. Louis Kahn created a civic institution of the highest caliber by acknowledging the innate sensibilities we all use to understand our surroundings, creating an experience whose

¹⁸ Hollander, *Cognitive Architecture*, 57-84.

inclusiveness is born out of its commitment to produce a biological connection between the building and its user.

Conclusion

Kahn's design for Fort Wayne was more than an experiment in form. The complexity of this building, the intricacies of this strategy, is not necessarily reliant on the tangible construction of the space, but in its purposeful existence as an institution. It's a solution that is inspired by a romance with the art of expression by both the city and the citizen. "The sanctuary of art – *sort of the ambience of a man's expressiveness* – has an outlet," Kahn said. "It is my belief that we live to express. The whole motivation of presence is to express. And what nature gives us is the instrument of expression which we all know as ourselves, which is like giving the instrument upon which the song of the soul can be played."¹⁹ In this capacity, the role of the institution is critical. It's a role that cannot survive without courageous leadership – which this campus continues to benefit from today.

Kahn goes on to say that, "When one thinks of simple beginnings which inspired our present institutions, it is evident that some drastic changes must be made which will inspire the recreation of the meaning, *city*, as primarily an assembly of those places vested with the care to uphold the sense of a way of life."²⁰ This is a wonderful way to discuss what the arts campus has meant to downtown Fort Wayne.

"The city is measured by its institutions," Kahn said. "The growth is felt through the works of its leaders sensitive to the desires of the people and to serve their desire of expression."²¹ The

¹⁹ Louis Kahn, "Silence and Light (1968, 1969)," in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 237.

²⁰ Kahn, "Silence and Light," 256.

²¹ Louis Kahn, "Silence and Light (1968, 1969)," in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 233.

vision this community had for a new arts campus should serve as an inspiration, and it is exciting to see some of that vision resurfacing now as we look to the future.

Kahn believed every building had its own soul. So, while the uses and activities will certainly change, the building itself will continue to serve as the cultural heart of northeast Indiana for generations to come.

This building, at its core, is not only an icon for expression, it is a symbol for our sense of community. Kahn reminded us that, “Human agreement is a sense of rapport, of commonness, of all bells ringing in vision – not needing to be understood by example but felt as an undeniable inner demand for presence. It is an inspiration with the promise of the possible.”²² And this “promise of the possible” is where we find ourselves again today.

For me, the Arts United Center is the materialization of a wonderful journey – a fifty-year-old story of a community’s bold vision and its lively relationship with one of the world’s greatest architects.

The building Kahn designed for us represents a culmination of ideas that he had explored throughout his career. It epitomizes his constant pursuit for perfection and speaks to the philosophical questions he was desperately trying to answer. At the same time, the solution he provided us was uniquely Fort Wayne.

This building is, in so many ways, a reflection of what makes our community special. It is strong, purposeful, authentic, unapologetic, understated, resilient, and honest. This building is beautiful, beautiful in a way that only we might understand. And in that way, in that moment, it’s perfect.

²² Kahn, “Silence and Light (1968, 1969),” 256.

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