

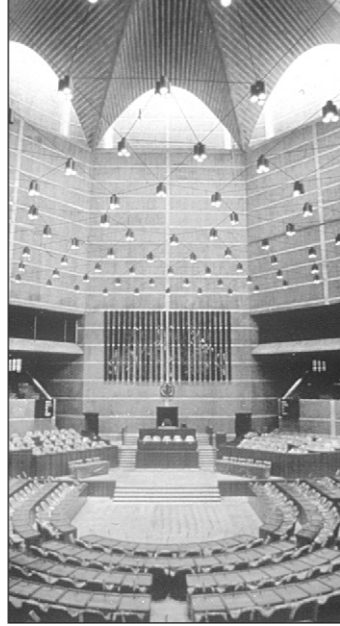
Exhibition

The Silent Music of Sherebanglanagar and Louis I. Kahn

Architectural exhibition at National Museum nears a successful end

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THE Nalinikanta Bhattasali Exhibition Hall of the Bangladesh National Museum at Shahbagh seemed to be echoing with the unheard footsteps of a person. It was him, an architect and his works that the exhibition presented. The mesmerizing effect was astonishing. Visitors from a cross section even those who are generally not so aware about architecture seemed curious and very much absorbed, too. The exhibition titled "Sherebangla Nagar, Louis I Kahn and the Making of a Capital Complex" that started on August 17 at the National Museum gallery in the city clearly narrated itself. To many of the visitors, the name, Louis I Kahn may have been very much new, but his masterpiece work, the Capital Complex in Dhaka, better known to us as Sherebanglanagar (The city of the Bengal Tiger) with its crowning part, the Sangsad Bhaban is very much their own.



Interior of assembly chamber

Sherebanglanagar or the Capital Complex is one of the most important and famous work of Louis I Kahn (1901-1974) the world-renowned American architect. The Project was initiated first in 1959 when the then Pakistan Government decided to establish the "Second Capital" in Dhaka. In 1962, the commission for the Project's Design was awarded to Louis I Kahn and after producing his first drawings in 1963, the construction started in 1964. After a pause during liberation war, Kahn was re-commissioned in 1973 by the Bangladesh Government and the Project Design continued till his last days in 1974. Although, most of the residential buildings were completed by 1967, the Sangsad Bhaban was not complete until 1983. From the great master plan, a part has been constructed only while others remain in drawings and

both from members within the country and abroad. Collection of Kahn's sketches, drawings and video presentation were generously loaned from the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania whereas USIS has initiated the earliest support for the execution of the exhibition.

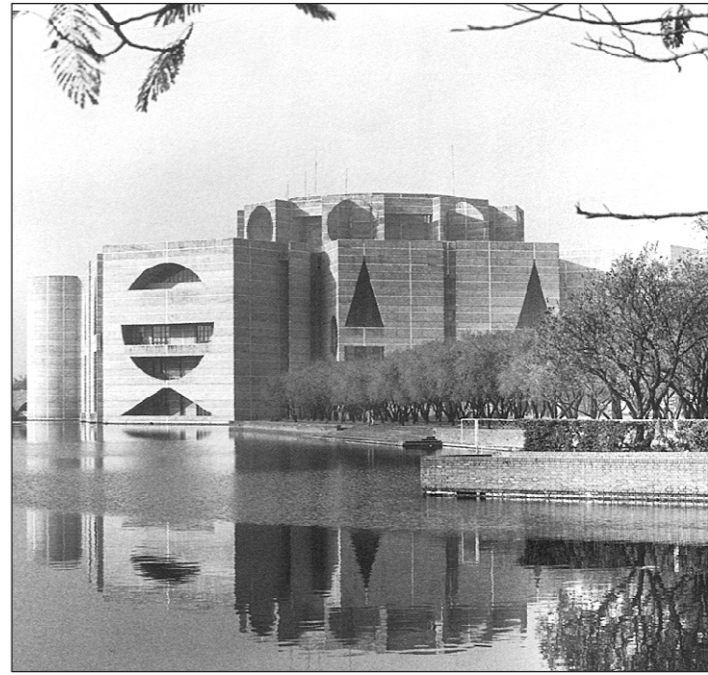
"Sher-e-bangla Nagar, Louis I Kahn and the Making of a Capital Complex" the exhibition basically had three aspects but all them intertwined with each other. One would have to go deep into each aspect simultaneously to understand the inherent theme. It was not an usual exhibition of Painting, Photography or Installation, but something different, where subject dominated over media of presentation. The exhibition presented a man of great sensitivity and his work, narrated a story of an architect who with his keen inner vision had deep understanding and realization about this nation and people and with that as one of the basic tools perceived and designed a capital complex. The exhibited materials expressed the unsaid words hidden behind the concrete and brick structures of Sherebanglanagar and the hushed music that should have played in between the light and shades of the total environment.

Entering the exhibition hall, the eyes were caught by three big sized coloured digital print images standing as barrier to the view inside and smartly giving a direction to proceed. These large sized banners combinedly showed a part of the red brick unique structures of Sherebanglanagar along with the caption of the exhibition. One wouldn't guess from there that the canvases on their other sides carry two big portraits of Kahn in a very casual gesture captivating the inquisitive eyes of the visitors all along. At the left side of the gallery a couple of more big canvases in

black and white digital prints adorn the wall. "The only language of man is art Louis I Kahn" stated one of the first white banner in black letters, below it is written another quote by Rabindranath Tagore "Our impulse to give expression to Universal Man produces art and literature. "Definitely a thoughtful way to start an exhibition like this.

The fascinating part of the exhibition was the numerous drawings and sketches of Kahn along with a few more Photographs placed below glass plates on tables arranged in rows. Along the aisles at intervals, and placed beside the tables were black stand lights dispersing light on the ceiling. It was an interesting display and reminded of the street like circulation space inside Sangsad Bhaban with light stands placed at intervals.

Kahn grouped the functions into two main clusters and named them "citadels": the Citadel of Assembly and the Citadel of Institutions. The Citadel of Assembly was formed by the Assembly Building, Hostels for Ministers, Secretaries and Members of Parliament and initially also by the Supreme Court and Mosque. While the other, the Citadel of Institutions included north of the Assembly group located civic and recreational facilities. His early sketches some done on yellow paper depicted skillful lines. There were sketches in the attempt to relate the harsh sun, rain and wind of this country with built form. And this was reflected in his meticulously handled design with deep porches, long walkways (both covered and uncovered), double skinned walls and architecture of shades and shadows. It is yet another big volume to discuss about the architectural analysis of his works and so this article refers to only his thoughts and philosophy related. Kahn's belief in the sacred meaning of secular assembly was very firm.



National Parliament building

Referring to the guiding idea and realization during the beginning of the complex design, Kahn stated "The house of legislation is a religious place. The stimulation came from the place of assembly. It is a place of transcendence for political people..... The assembly establishes or modifies the institutions of man". "What I'm trying to do is establish a belief out of a philosophy so that whatever they do is always answerable to it." he said.

In the Citadel of Assembly, Kahn played with the elements such that the nature of the institutions served the collective purpose of man. To give some shape to the largely featureless terrain and to guard against floods, Kahn had proposed embanked roadways and geometrically shaped mounds of earth. On these he had placed related elements, partly framed by a lake that he "employed".... as a discipline of

location and boundary". The opposite end of this expansive site was provided with facilities like schools, libraries and other civic facilities constituting the Citadel of Institutions balancing the Citadel of Assembly.

The Assembly Building or Sangsad Bhaban was designed as the central focus of the complex. Although the initially planned Supreme Court was eventually dropped from the composition, the mosque was converted into a large Prayer Hall attached to the Assembly Building. With a square plan and modest form of blank walls, corner turrets and light streaming in through them, the Prayer Hall (Cube of Light) is a vital element in the whole composition of Sangsad Bhaban and marks the main public entrance. The richly curvilinear structure with cylindrical light giving elements providing a mystic environment was resolutely angled away from

the main axis and toward Mecca and it maintained a visible presence. "Mosque could talk to Assembly and Assembly could talk to Mosque" was his concept obtained from the observation and study of the people here and he wanted to create the dialogue between the secular spirit of assembly with the religious spirit of assembly through architecture. The Sangsad Bhaban emerging as the symbol of democracy and national aspiration has been able to captivate the imagination of people far and wide. Majestically placed with grandeur in the middle of a carefully composed matrix of buildings, lakes, gardens and plazas and rising from the water with the boldness of concrete, this masterpiece is a rare example of cultural sensitivity, of deep understanding and realization. With three concentric layers having the main Assembly Chamber as the inner core, the outermost layer appears like "a multi-faceted stone.

Louis I Kahn was born in 1901 on the Baltic fringe of imperial Russia, in Estonia. He along with family immigrated to America in 1904 and settled in Philadelphia. In later years, Kahn remembered the city with loving attitude. "The city", he said, "is a place where a small boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life." After a course on architectural history, he decided to give up his plans to study painting and accordingly his life in architecture began at the University of Pennsylvania. Kahn had been able to become a supremely great architect, but "Professor Kahn" as he was fondly known in Dhaka was not a personality detached from people. Despite being a world renowned architect and a person of higher magnitude he spontaneously had become very close to the persons who worked with him here.

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