

Saving the Sangsad Bhaban (in a Democracy)

DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

ONE by one, often simultaneously by synchronised pillage, within fraction of the time taken for their evolution, we have ruthlessly torn apart pages from our history, our culture, our very being. From encyclopaedic dimensions we have managed to reduce our past to but a few wrinkly tattered pages. They too await the verdict of obliteration from a society (Oh, how careless we are with words!) that has demonstrated as much insensibility as a baboon under anaesthesia.

Other than the callous practice of demolishing its edifices, a civilisation can also be disfigured, as has been ours, by a systematic process of senseless additions and alterations to suit petty requirements, often not more than ego trips plugged to financially rewarding adventures of the powers that be; so much so as to make our history, our culture, our very being totally unrecognisable.

Far worse than these acts of insanity is our inability to bear any sense of shame. Therein lies our collective failure as a nation.

Neglect, indiscriminate modifications in the name of modernisation, encroachment, acquisitiveness and lack of knowledge have all contributed to almost effacing this wisdom-forsaken nation of its built legacy.

The modest but proud collection that we had of the past has dwindled. Today we linger on to vague icons of yesteryears. Tomorrow we may not have a past. No people are more wretched.

The Katras (1644 and 1663) are buried in municipal greed, the unique Khan Mohammad Mridha Masjid (1706) is threatened by burgeoning commerce, ornate Painam Nagar (19th C) is clinging on to its mortar, the handcrafted Indo-British residences of Old Dhaka representing a time gone by are besieged with dubious development plans, Ruplal House (19th C) has been distastefully raped by spice merchants. Ravaged over decades more by Man than by the elements, today they are all devoid of their first composition.

In terms of appendage, Binat Bibi Masjid (1457 AD, Dhaka's most ancient) has been compelled to succumb to expansion. The splendour of Curzon Hall (1904) has been accentuated by its much younger but poorly imitating cousin.

Whilst apathy towards our distant past is well established, illustrious buildings that are less than half a century old are no further from the insensitivity of architects and bureaucracy. True to our dismal tradition, there is now a collaborative effort to devastate a creation, regarded a masterpiece worldwide.

Architect, educator, and philosopher Louis I. Kahn designed the Sangsad Bhaban in Dhaka from 1962 till his death in 1974; the *magnum opus* was subsequently completed posthumously in 1983.

The adopted American architect, a disciple of Le Corbusier, was commissioned for the project contemptuously called Pakistan's Second Capital by the autocratic Pakistan government. History wrote a different script and today this timeless architecture of concrete, marble and brick, rich in symbols and archetypes houses the parliament of an independent country, and appropriately so for Kahn's 'symphony' was second to none.

The 'dense, multi-layered, concentric agglomeration of walled spaces', resembling congested yet airy streets at its nine-storey atriums and nostalgic of light playing on ancient classical ruins at places, are arranged as in serving the served area of the innermost chamber of elected legislators. Outside, the Bhaban emerges surrealistically from a

watercourse, shimmering in the bright sunshine, accentuated again by a garland of lesser buildings the principle of 'served' and 'servant' at play yet another time.

A 'mystical neo-Platonist, a structural rationalist, a visionary champion of Beaux-Arts principles, a rebel against modernism' the celebrated Kahn is heralded as one of the four Master Architects of the eventful 20th century. Expressive of brutalism and ceremonial monumentality Kahn's building our Sangsad Bhaban is feted across the globe as his most outstanding work. It stands tall as one of the all-time architectural masterpieces among the buildings of the world.

Kahn had a vision, a philosophy for the vast tract of land, a complete programme. Taking away any component from the whole of the Capital complex, an attempt not yet dared because of cerebral limitation, or filling up precious voids, as has been implemented and is being further contemplated, can only disfigure the complete picture a cardinal sin.

A recent scheme with non-Kahn drawings by the Department of Architecture, Government of Bangladesh, to construct residences for the Speaker and Deputy Speaker askew to Kahn's necklace of brick, complete with its massive medallion, is a vile plot to belittle the nation internationally and embarrass the government. All that the new incongruous buildings can do, location contrary to any of several Master Plans of Kahn, is upset the basic composition, a guarded entity of an architect. The fear of aesthetic conflict is also well founded. The consequential ignominy will brand us a people devoid of cultural wisdom, lacking understanding of the eternal worth and universal significance of Kahn's cosmos.

The irresponsible proposal must be quashed for good, if only to save one of the richest treasures this country can boast of, as the Egyptians do of their pyramids, the Greeks their Parthenon, the Romans their Coliseum. Kahn would have been wistfully blissful by that historical analogy.

The fool may argue that only two new buildings are being constructed on an empty patch of land. Alas! The significance and inevitability of void in architecture is oft misunderstood and cannot be overemphasised. Voids create opportunities for the solids, which in turn cause space that are again void. In existence they have to be mutually compatible. They are, if only they knew.

Our agenda today is to make a conscious effort to project the Master such that many more of us may understand why we need to be proud of our possession our Sangsad Bhaban.

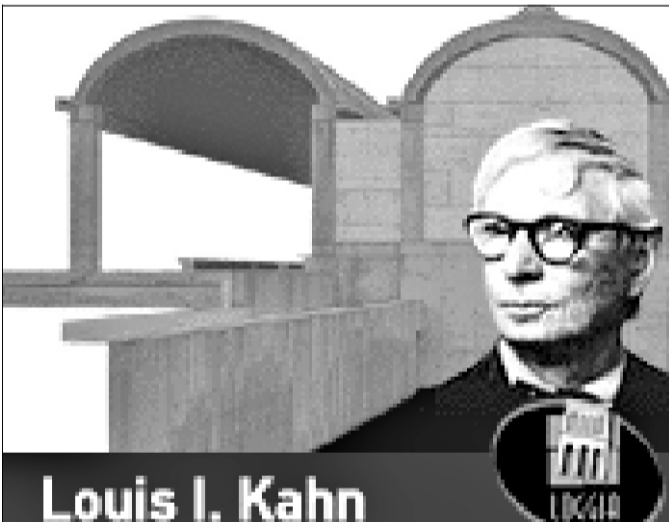
The author is Consultant to the Editor on Urban Issues and Professor and Dean, Faculty of Architecture and Planning, BUET.



"You can never learn anything that is not a part of yourself."

Louis I Kahn is considered to be one of the great master builders of our time.

- 1901, 20 February: Born in Osel, Estonia
- 1905: Came to Philadelphia, USA
- 1928: Studied classical architecture in Europe
- 1937-1939: Participated in Public Housing Projects
- 1947: Taught at Yale Univ.
- 1955: Taught at Univ. of Pennsylvania
- 1965: FAIA Medal of Honour Danish Architectural Association
- 1971: Gold Medal, AIA (American Institute of Architects)
- 1972: Royal Gold Medal for Architecture, RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects)
- 1974, 17 March: Passed away



Complete works

- 1935-39:
Jersey Homesteads Cooperative Development, Hightstown, NJ; 1935-37 houses and factory
Prefabricated House; 1937*
- 1940-49:
Oser House, Melrose Park, PA; 1940-42
Carver Court Housing, Coatesville, PA; 1941-43
Pine Ford Acres, Middletown, PA; 1941-43, partially demolished
Bomber City (Willow Run), Detroit, MI; 1942-43*
Lily Ponds Housing, Washington, DC; 1942-43, partially demolished
Hotel for 194x, published; 1943*
Parasol House Type, for Knoll Associates; 1944*
Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, Store Design, published; 1944*
Radbill Oil Company, Philadelphia, PA; 1944-47
Finklestein House (addition), Ardmore, PA; 1945-48*
Hooper House (addition), Baltimore, MD; 1946*
Philadelphia City Planning: Triangle Area, Philadelphia, PA; 1946-48*
Jefferson Expansion Memorial Competition, St. Louis, MO; 1947*
Ehle House, Haverford, PA; 1947-48*
Roche House, Conshohocken, PA; 1947-49
Tompkins House, Philadelphia, PA; 1947-49*
Weiss House, Norristown, PA; 1947-50
Genel House, Wynnewood, PA; 1948-51
Jewish Agency for Palestine Emergency Housing, Israel; 1949*
- 1950-59
Philadelphia City Planning: Traffic Studies, Philadelphia, PA; 1951-53*
Row House Studies for City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA; 1951-53*
- Yale Art Gallery, New Haven, CT; 1951-53
Fruchter House, Philadelphia, PA; 1951-54*
Mill Creek Housing, Philadelphia, PA; 1951-56
Philadelphia City Planning: Penn Center, Philadelphia, PA; 1951-58*
City Tower Project, Philadelphia, PA; 1952-57*
Adath Jeshuran Synagogue, Elkins Park, PA; 1954-55*
Ader House, Philadelphia, PA; 1954-57, demolished
Jewish Community Center, Trenton, NJ; 1954-59 bathhouse and day camp built
Wharton Esherick Workshop, Paoli, PA; 1955-56
Morris House, Mt. Kisco, NY; 1955-58*
Washington University Library Competition, St. Louis, MO; 1956*
Philadelphia City Planning: Civic Center, Philadelphia, PA; 1956-57*
Research Institute for Advanced Science, Baltimore, MD; 1956-58*
Clever House, Cherry Hill, NJ; 1957-62
Richards Medical Research Laboratories, Philadelphia, PA; 1957-65
Tribune Review Building, Greensburg, PA; 1958-62
Fleisher House, Elkins Park, PA; 1959*
Goldenberg House, Rydal, PA; 1959*
Aubury Arboretum Housing Development, Philadelphia, PA; 1959-60*
Esherick House, Chestnut Hill, PA; 1959-61
United States Consulate, Luanda, Angola; 1959-62*
Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, CA; 1959-65
First Unitarian Church, Rochester, NY; 1959-69
Fine Arts Center, Fort Wayne, IN; 1959-73 theatre and offices
- 1960-69:
Roosevelt Memorial Competition, Washington, DC; 1960*
Barge for American Wind Symphony Orchestra, River Thames, Eng.;

- 1960-61*
Bristol Township Municipal Building, Levittown, PA; 1960-61*
Philadelphia City Planning: Market East, Philadelphia, PA; 1960-63*
University of Virginia Chemistry Building, Charlottesville, VA; 1960-63*
Eleanor Donnelley Erdman Hall, Bryn Mawr, PA; 1960-65
Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA; 1960-66*
Fisher House, Hatboro, PA; 1960-67
Carborundum Warehouse and Sales Office, Atlanta, GA; 1961-62*
Levy Memorial Playground, New York, NY; 1961-66*
Mikveh Israel Synagogue, Philadelphia, PA; 1961-72*
Esherick House (addition for Mrs. Parker), Chestnut Hill, PA; 1962-64*
Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India; 1962-74
National Capitol of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh; 1962-83
Hall of Ocean Life, Peabody Museum, New Haven, CT; 1963-65*
President's Estate, Islamabad, Pakistan; 1963-66*
Interama Community B, Miami, FL; 1963-69*
Barge for American Wind Symphony Orchestra, Pittsburgh, PA; 1964-67*
- Dominican Motherhouse St. Catherine de Ricci, Media, PA; 1965-69*
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD; 1965-69*
Phillips Exeter Academy: Library/Dining Hall, Exeter, NH; 1965-72
Broadway Church and Office Building, New York, NY; 1966-68*
Olivetti-Underwood Factory, Harrisburg, PA; 1966-70
Stern House, Washington, DC; 1966-70*
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX; 1966-72
Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs, New York, NY; 1966-72*
Temple Beth-El Synagogue, Chippaqua, NY; 1966-72
Kansas City Office Building, Kansas City, MO; 1966-73*
Rittenhouse Square Housing, Philadelphia, PA; 1967*
Hill Renewal and Redevelopment, New Haven, CT; 1967-74*
Hurva Synagogue, Jerusalem, Israel; 1967-74*
Palazzo Congressi-Biennale, Venice, Italy, 1968-74*
Wolfson Center for Engineering, Tel-Aviv, Israel; 1968-74 partially built
Raab Dual Movie Theater, Philadelphia, PA; 1969-70*
Rice University School of Architecture, Houston, TX; 1969-70*
Inner Harbor Project, Baltimore, MD; 1969-73*
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT; 1969-74
- 1970-75
Family Planning Center, Khatmandu, Nepal; 1970-75 partially built
Treehouse, Eagleville Hospital, Eagleville, PA; 1971*
Bicentennial Exposition, Philadelphia, PA; 1971-73*
Government Hill Development, Jerusalem, Israel; 1971-73*
Korman House, Fort Washington, PA; 1971-73
Graduate Theological Union Library, Berkeley, CA; 1971-74 built after Kahn's death
Honickman House, Fort Washington, PA; 1971-74*
de Menil Foundation, Houston, TX; 1972-74*
Philadelphia City Planning: Independence Mall, Philadelphia, PA; 1972-74*
- Pocono Arts Center, Luzerne County, PA; 1972-74*
Abbasabad Redevelopment, Tehran, Iran; 1973-74*
Roosevelt Memorial, New York, NY; 1973-74*
(* = unbuilt)



Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban

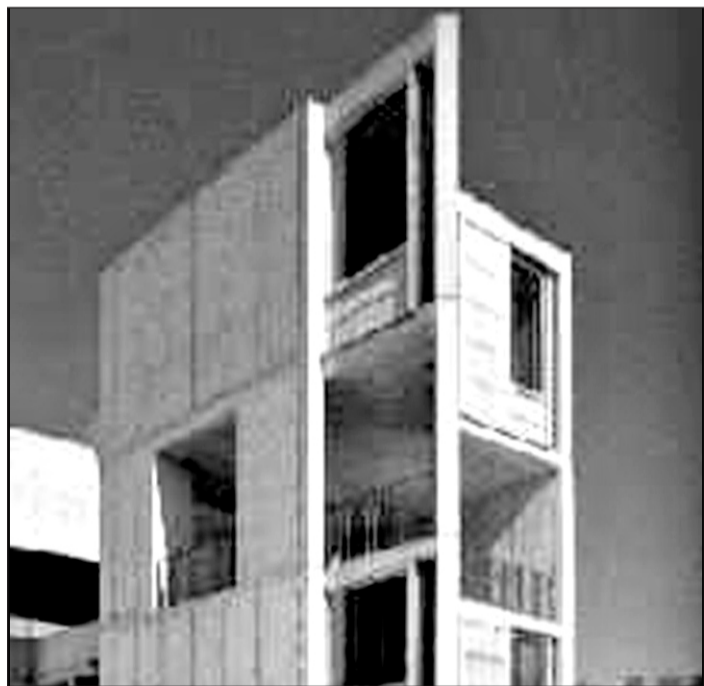
The gift of light

QUOC DOAN

A curious little three-year old child saw something that attracted his eye. This child of a Jewish artisan in stained glass was attracted by the colour of coals burning green rather than red or blue. He proceeded to reach into the fire and pull some out into his apron. Suddenly the coals flared up, setting the little boy almost on fire. The flames seriously burned his face and hands, leaving him permanent, disfiguring scars. His mother, an educated woman in art and tradition, strongly believed he had been touched by his great destiny. This little boy grew up to become one of the great leading architects of the twentieth century, with designs founded on geometric forms rising up through functional and spatial harmony. Quintessential in his designs was the concern for relation to the human and the integral role of natural light. Louis I Kahn is considered one of the pivotal architects who bridged the gap between modernism and post-modernism. With successful designs that more than stood the test of time but stood as a model for others to learn and be inspired from, Louis Kahn, as believed by his mother, had truly been touched by "the gift of light."

Growing up in Philadelphia, Louis Kahn faced many obstacles, which ironically developed his artistic talent. Other kids would always contribute in mocking and teasing him for his scarred face. Always made conscious of this disfigurement, Louis found his escape through art. His teachers recognized his gift for drafting and gave him many chances for him to show his talent. He gained self-confidence by utilizing the skill, which set him apart. Private philanthropy saw to it that he received lessons in painting after winning citywide art competitions. During his senior year in high school, he took a class in architectural history, which changed the path of his life. Inspired by what he saw, he decided not to continue his studies as an art major, (even though he had received a full scholarship to a prestigious school), but instead study in the field of architecture. But he would never lose grasp of the art.ÉÉ

At the University of Pennsylvania, Louis Kahn studied the Beaux-Arts programme for architecture students, which has shaped the foundation of his work for rest of his life. With a great emphasis on different techniques of drawing, he learned fundamental steps in a design process. After completing his Master's at University of Pennsylvania, he took a European tour of architectural sites. Instead of visiting the modern sites of that time, Louis Kahn opted for the classical French city of Carcassonne. This experience by far had the most influence on him in all his studies and he would continue to compare and come back to this style of design and thought. He stated with enthusiasm, "It was a great architectural event, centuries ago, when the walls parted and the columns became. The column is the greatest event in architecture, the play of shadow and light, of infinite mystery. The wall is open. The column becomes the giver of light." This experience for Louis Kahn was where he discovered the power of the gift of light.



Jona Salk Institute



Philip Exeter Academy Library

Louis Kahn in Bangladesh...

RACHEL PETERSON

A professor at Yale School of Architecture at 46, and an important influence in urban architecture, (Louis Isadore) Kahn's focus was apparently much more on architectural theory rather than its practical application. As such, much of his work was not actually brought to life until he was in his 50s, and much of what he designed in his lifetime was never built. He developed what is called a 'classically romantic' style, in which functional areas such as stairwells and air ducts feature prominently, often as tower-like structures surrounding the main living and working areas. Much like what we saw in the Assembly Buildings in downtown Dhaka, many of Kahn's most famous projects tended to utilize concrete and brick in an unorthodox manner. Some examples of this style include the Yale Art Gallery (1953), the Richards Medical Research Building, University of Pennsylvania, (195761), and the Centre for British Art and Studies at Yale University (196974).

Although he completed the designs for the Jewish Agency for Palestine Emergency Housing in 1949, and the United States Consulate in Luanda, Angola in 1959, the first actual building of one of his overseas designs was the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India which was begun in 1962 and completed in 1974.

Credited with having said, "structure is the giver of light," Kahn was well known for his use of and control of natural light. His approach to the issues of light in Dhaka resulted in an incredibly heavy, geometrically chunky building but one that gives the soft impression of air and light via the positioning of windows and large open geometrical openings in walls, ceilings and partitions.

Apparently when Kahn was nominated (posthumously) for an Aga Khan Award for these National Assembly Buildings in 1986, the jury chose not to

honour him even though the complex had long been internationally acclaimed as a "masterwork". The jurors felt that, "[the buildings] had acoustical and ventilation problems; its materials and design were inappropriate for the climate; in a city of small-scale, mostly open structures, its solidly imposing, complex scheme disoriented visitors and isolated employees from the outdoors; and, finally, for such a poor nation, it was enormously costly to construct and continued to be extremely expensive to maintain." [Metropolis Magazine, Sept 1997]

As we approached this expanse of land, water and buildings we were all taken somewhat aback by the complexity of the structures and their sheer geometric beauty. Sitting on 200 acres of land, the 'Sangsad Bhaban' sits brilliantly in an enormous pool of water which gives the whole complex the look of a post-modern castle complete with moat. The buildings do not just include the Parliament itself but also the members' residences and spaces for housing other functionaries and dignitaries. What was striking for those of us who had never experienced anything but hyper crowds, noise, traffic and filth in Dhaka, was that this complex sat peacefully amidst a beautiful expanse of green fields and lining the grounds was a forest of trees.

As we were not permitted to take pictures we had to soak in all that we saw as we walked around and around inside the main structure.... Nine-story atriums bordered by offices hidden behind huge walls of raw, grey concrete lined with white marble and cut with enormous geometric openings. It seemed to me that Kahn had taken university dining hall glasses, and used those and the various triangular shapes from the tools used by young architects drawn hundred of these shapes one over the other until the page was full... then looked at it and exclaimed, "and now.... to make it three dimensional!"

The author is a Kahn Researcher and the article is an extract from her paper