

Monumental moments for a monument

DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

THE Bangladesh High Court on 21 June delivered a judgement which is almost as monumental as the epic creation of one of the foremost architects the world has seen, Louis Isadore Kahn, a Russian-born Jew, a migrant, a naturalised citizen of the USA, an architect to the world.

On a writ petition filed by the Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB) and the Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon, the High Court not only declared "illegal the under-construction residences of the speaker and deputy speaker in the parliament complex, as the government distorted the original design of architect Louis I Kahn's 1973 masterpiece" but also "asked the government to take steps to announce the parliament building as part of national heritage". (DS 22 June)

The HC bench of Justice Mohammad Iman Ali and Justice Shamim Hasnain went on to describe the construction works of the new buildings as an "arrogant attitude of this government".

This is something that does not happen everyday, although rampant violation of building rules, wholesale apathy towards objects of our national history, heritage and honour, and wanton greed for open land is the rule in our society.

The High Court judgement will in future hopefully stand in the way of any egotistical attitude of public representatives and officers who seldom stop to realise that what they spoil today they suffer tomorrow.

A building that one makes today by violating government rules and common sense can only be enjoyed for the few months or years one holds office; the open space that he preserves is for him to enjoy all his life.

Tourists from around the world marvel at the colossal building that rests on a moat, the precursor of Kahn's water architecture that was never to be. Scholars from Tokyo to Tangiers, Latvia to Laos, travel to this low-lying flood-prone area, as Kahn saw it, to marvel at our parliament building. What should naturally have been transformed into a site of national heritage to beckon the world, on the contrary Kahn's capitol has been the victim of neglect and ruthless bureaucracy over the years.

Today we present some selected views on the building from architects and authors of different countries in a bid to disseminate to all concerned why Kahn's Sangsad Bhaban needs to be conserved in its entirety. Declaring it as national heritage shall be a step in the right direction.

The building has aged and it is not without its problems. Marble slabs are parting with the massive walls, the main session chamber has acoustic problems, it is easy to be disorientated inside the building, running costs are high, upkeep has always been a headache. Yet it is the final stroke of genius from a Master Architect of the world.

The world has again been enriched as philosophically as Kahn, as masterly in fusing two styles to evolve a third that few have yet been

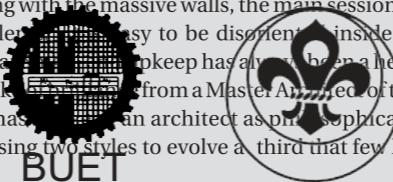


PHOTO: ABU H IMAMU

The parliament building, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar

Our architect -- Louis Isadore Kahn

What the rest of the world says

BANGLADESH got from Kahn one of the most distinctive and memorable, and architecturally creative capitols in the world. It's a work that was outside of the mainstream of fashion in its time and, perhaps for that reason, it's not going to be dated but seems timeless. It's future as an architectural monument is secure," wrote a Kahn buff Paul Malo.

The Bangladesh High Court was perhaps equally convinced in delivering its judgement 21 June to protect the national heritage building.

"It's the play of positive and negative, the negative, not being mere absence of solid (as in Corbusier's work), which is mostly concerned with composition of solids) but with the voids becoming figure (i.e. having shape and quality)," says another.

"Louis Kahn's Complex at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, with the buildings in a setting of lakes, gardens, orchards, and parks, is perhaps the most modern vision of a 'Bengali' city. While the Parliament Building poses a monumental architectural presence, Kahn gave extensive thought to how grouping the various buildings in a setting of water and vegetation could evoke imagery from the Bengali landscape. One preponderant reflection for him was 'how the buildings are to take their place on the land'. Kahn wanted to heighten the idea that buildings also come together in a particular way in the delta, and that the age-old deltaic practice of 'dig-and-mound' could generate a modern interpretation of hydrological architecture."

"In 1973, the Bangladesh government offered Kahn an additional 2000 acres of land to the north of the Capital Complex, asking him to think of a communal assembly."

"Louis I. Kahn was born on February 20 in 1901 in Saarana, Estonia, Russian Empire. Leopold

and monsoon seasons. While much of Kahn's Capital Complex was eventually built, his ideas for a city of 'water architecture' were, unfortunately, interrupted by his sudden death in 1974."

"Architect Louis Kahn discovered late in life how to transform the ruins of ancient Rome into modern buildings. His pursuit of an ideal geometric order was informed by a keen sense of history. Based on platonic shapes, his buildings, at once monumental and human in scale, marked the end of the International Style and opened the way for a revival of vernacular and classical traditions."

"Louis Kahn was the creative mind behind some of the most important buildings of the 20th century, including the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California; The Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas; and the National Assembly Building of Bangladesh, in Dhaka.

Monumental and full of mystery, his buildings are intensely powerful and spiritual, using natural light as the controlling principle of the design, and the character of the building changes throughout the day depending on the time, weather and season.

Kahn preferred simple materials: brick and concrete, but worked with them with astonishing facility, creating spaces that are both highly functional and spiritually uplifting. For Kahn, the architecture became the search for truth and the buildings were living things.

The Bangladesh project is a wonderful story in that a Jewish architect is brought to a Muslim country, building a 20,000-square-foot masjid for the National Assembly."

"Louis I. Kahn was born on February 20 in 1901 in Saarana, Estonia, Russian Empire. Leopold

his entire life, Louis Kahn attended the city's public schools and distinguished himself as an artist from an early age. During his last year in high school, he took a required course in architecture and determined to become an architect instead of an artist. Although he had been awarded a four-year merit scholarship to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, he chose instead to attend the University of Pennsylvania, where he could study architecture. To finance his education, Kahn worked in architectural offices and in movie theatres, where he improvised on the keyboard to accompany silent films."

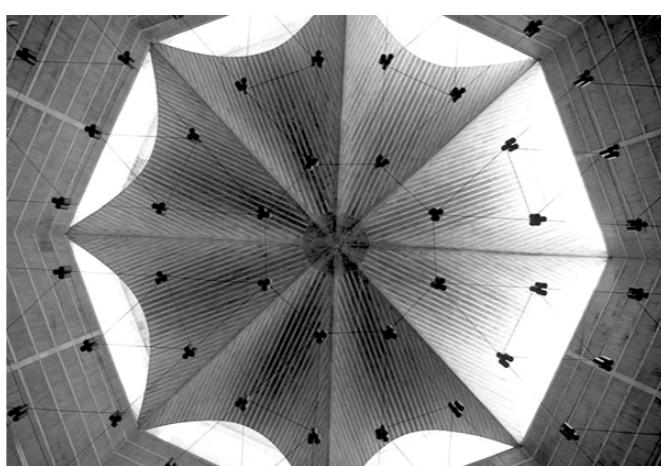
"Graduating in 1924, Kahn found employment as a draftsman in the offices of the City Architect of Philadelphia. After three years in that office, including one as Chief of Design for the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition 1925-1926, and a fourth year spent working for yet another architect he travelled for a year throughout Europe to finish his Beaux-Arts education."

"Kahn went to, or through, a large number of countries: England, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and France. In later years he told friends and family of visiting relatives on Saaremaa and in Riga.

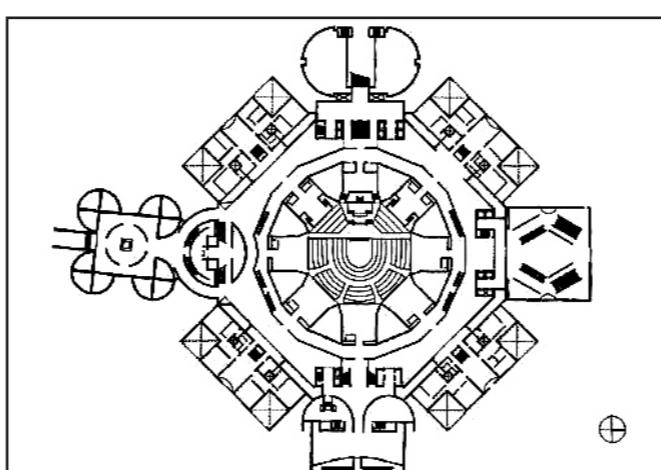
"Returning to Philadelphia in April 1929, he exhibited in the Pennsylvania Academy of Art the sketches he had made in Europe; took a position with his former professor, Paul Philippe Cret; and, feeling himself professionally established, married in 1930 Esther Virginia Israeli. However, after working on Cret's Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., Kahn left his teacher. For Kahn, the architecture became the search for truth and the buildings were living things.

The Bangladesh project is a wonderful story in that a Jewish architect is brought to a Muslim country, building a 20,000-square-foot masjid for the National Assembly."

"Louis I. Kahn was born on February 20 in 1901 in Saarana, Estonia, Russian Empire. Leopold



Canopy



Floor plan

where they worked on the Jersey Hospitals program."

"Next, in 1937, Kahn opened an office on Walnut Street in downtown Philadelphia; but a few years later, in 1941, he joined architect George Howe, a prominent 'traditional' architect turned modernist, who built the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society building in 1931-32 with his then partner William Lescase. The PSFS, recognized as the first International Style skyscraper in the USA, set a precedent. When Kahn joined Howe, he moved to the Philadelphia Bulletin Building, which Howe had modernized in 1936. With war approaching, these architects sought government commissions and concentrated on wartime housing..."

"After World War II, Kahn served as vice president and then president of the American Society of Planners and Architects. Once again he established a private practice of his own. In 1947, he participated in thesis juries in architecture at Princeton. He was invited to become a visiting critic for advanced design at Yale University, where he subsequently became chief critic in architectural design. In 1949, Kahn served in the then new country of Israel as a planning consultant for emergency housing."

"From December 1950 through February 1951 he held an appointment as resident architect at the American Academy in Rome. From there he travelled with companions from the Academy throughout Italy, Egypt, and Greece, recording historic architecture in on-site drawings and sketches that were later exhibited in the Pennsylvania Academy of Art. This was a significant period in Kahn's life, as he reconciled his belief in modernism with his admiration for enduring buildings of the past."

"It was during the months in Rome that Kahn received his first major public commission: a new, modern extension to the venerable Yale University Art Gallery. In 1941, the University had accepted the Societe Anonyme collection of paintings, sculpture, and prints that was originally formed by Katherine Dreier and Marcel Duchamp with other artists. This had expanded the range of the Gallery's works into modern art and called for further exhibition space. The building was well received by architects and critics in 1953 when it opened, and it marked a change in his career. No longer was he just a respected theorist and teacher of architecture, one who was associated primarily with planning and housing. He had creatively designed a widely admired building that was both successful and innovative. That same year, 1953, Kahn was made a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and two years later became professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Eventually he was to hold a chair there that is named for his professor, Paul Philippe Cret."

"From the mid-1950s Kahn's international reputation was firmly established. In 1959 he addressed the CIAM Conference in Otterlo, the Netherlands, and the following year he attended the World Design Conference in Tokyo. In 1961, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted an exhibition devoted to a single building of his, the Alfred Newton Richards Medical Research Building designed for the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Initiated in 1957, the Richards Building had been dedicated in 1960, although the second stage, the Biology Building, took until 1965 to complete."

"Kahn was nearly sixty when

slab system giving access to mechanical systems, and a somewhat 'brutalist' shock to Yale's neo-Gothic context.

2. Richards Medical Research Laboratories, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, (1957-1965), regarding which Kahn said, "No space you can devise can satisfy these requirements. I thought what they should have was a corner for thought, in a word, a studio instead of slices of space."

3. Jonas Salk Institute, La Jolla, California, (1959-1965), divided into work and contemplative spaces suffused with light and the ocean.

4. Phillips Exeter Academy Library, Exeter, New Hampshire, (1965-1972)

5. National Assembly in Dhaka, Bangladesh (1962-1974), considered his masterpiece and one of the great monuments of International Modernism.

6. Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, (1967-1972). 7. Yale University Centre for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, (1969-1974) "Kahn's architecture is notable for its simple, platonic forms and compositions. Kahn's design of buildings, characterized by powerful, massive forms, made him one of the most discussed architects to emerge after World War II. Through the use of brick and poured-in-place concrete masonry, he developed a contemporary and monumental architecture that maintained sympathy for the site. While rooted in the International Style, Kahn's architecture was a blend of his Beaux Arts education and a personal aesthetic impulse to develop his own architectural forms." "In the last decade of his life, before a fatal heart attack suffered in the men's room of Penn Station in 1974, Kahn focused increasingly on the landscape of the sites, sharing this interest with Harriet Pattison, who worked in his office, with whom he had an extramarital affair, and who bore him a son, Nathaniel, born in 1962. Nathaniel was eleven years old when his father passed away."

"Like R. Buckminster Fuller, Kahn was concerned about wasteful use of natural resources; his urban-planning schemes proposed geodesic skyscrapers and huge car silos. He taught at Yale University (1947-1957) and the University of Pennsylvania (1957-74), where appreciation for his intellect gained him a cult status."

Kahn's important works include:

1. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut (1951-53); the first significant commission of Louis Kahn and his first masterpiece, replete with technical innovations, like a floor

Pattison. His son with Pattison, Nathaniel Kahn, made an Oscar-nominated biographical documentary about Louis Kahn, entitled 'My Architect', which gives glimpses of the architecture while it focuses on talking heads. It includes interviews with renowned architect contemporaries such as Frank Gehry, Philip Johnson, I. M. Pei, and Robert Stern, but also an insider's view of Kahn's unusual family arrangements."

"In this (Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban) building his arrived at a new and dynamic integration of formal and functional elements, ingeniously relating mechanical services to the total architecture. Kahn eschewed the seemingly weightless International Style glass boxes of his time and created bold, dignified, and sometimes brooding or harsh structures of massed stone and concrete."

"It (Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban) is now generally regarded as Kahn's crown jewel. After his death, work continued on the Yale Centre for British Art in New Haven. This museum opened in 1977, after Architects Pellecchia and Meyers, both of whom had worked for Kahn, completed it. Likewise, work continued on the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India, under Anant Raje and Balkrishna Doshi, although the original complex was largely finished before Kahn died. Doshi, who once worked with Le Corbusier, was instrumental in bringing Louis Kahn to work in India. On the capitol of Bangladesh in Dhaka, which Kahn had designed in its entirety, his associates continued work on the Parliament Building until 1983. Finally, in the years 1976-77 the Wolfson Centre for Mechanical and Transportation Engineering in Tel Aviv, Israel, was built posthumously according to Kahn's design."

Source:
www.concise.britannica.com,
www.free-definition.com,
www.worldviewcities.org,
www.tioh.org/www.infoplease.com,
www.kimbrellart.org and 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.



Interiors

Kahn, father of Louis, was Estonian and served as a paymaster in the Russian army. Kahn's mother, Bertha Mendelsohn, was a native of Riga, Latvia, a major Hanseatic city in its day. After Leopold's discharge from the army, he and Leopold, fearing recall into the army during the Russo-Japanese War, immigrated to the United States in 1904. Mrs.

Kahn and their three children (Louis was the oldest) followed in 1906, and the family settled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where they were relatives nearby. On May 15, 1914, all were naturalized as American citizens."

"A true son of Philadelphia, which was to remain his home for

insufficient commissions to keep the staff employed. He next served two years as a designer for the large Philadelphia architectural firm of Tantinger, Borie, and Medary."

"From 1933 to 1934, Kahn organized and directed the Architectural Research Group, largely made up of architects who were unemployed in those depression years. Now a modernist, he was also head of a team making housing studies for the Philadelphia City Planning Commission for two years, until the end of 1935. That year saw the establishment of his independent practice and a call to Washington to serve as assistant to principal architect Alfred Kastner for the Resettlement Administration



Newly built residences of Speaker and Deputy Speaker in the complex.

PHOTO: STAR