

Seven Years with Louis I. Kahn

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in Louis I. Kahn Houses by Yutaka Saito

Encounter

It was 1960 when we got to know Louis I. Kahn. Before then, we had bought a beautiful two-acre suburban lot of trees and a meandering stream. At first, we had no grand plan in our search for an architect to design our home. The principals of one firm which had just finished a major building in Philadelphia mentioned that they had no financial need to do private homes but their mentor, Louis I. Kahn, still did them. We called Mr. Kahn. At that time he had a devoted following among architects and students, but little appreciation by those not in the field. He agreed to speak to us and to see our site. A week later we picked him up at a local train station (as he didn't drive) and began a wonderful relationship that lasted until his death in 1974.

We saw him perhaps every two months, on average, over the next seven years. He came to the house even after it was built, joined us for meals and even led a mini-discussion among our friends about our house and his philosophy of architecture.

On first contact Mr. Kahn did not make an impressive appearance. He was short in stature and had a badly burned face from a childhood accident. He wore black jackets, frequently shiny from wear. These superficialities shortly faded, as his intellect, energy, humor and warmth showed through. He worked intensely with his yellow paper and black charcoal and in short time a room or home appeared, peopled and landscaped.

We felt we were dealing with a wonderfully practical architect when, at our first meeting, he asked what rooms we needed. He wrote them down and when informed of our budget red-lined the list eliminating a music room, atrium and conservatory. This was a home for which we budgeted \$45,000 to build, apart from the architectural fee to Mr. Kahn. In those days, this was a rather low figure for an architect-designed home.

As a family physician with evening office hours, along with busy days, it would have been hard to find common time to meet with a busy architect. However, Mr. Kahn worked late and our coming in to meet him at 10 p.m. presented no problem to him. We would ring the bell at his Walnut Street office. He would lean out the window on the third or fourth floor that he occupied and drop the keys for us to enter. What could have been a lethal mass of keys usually dropped beside us and occasionally into our hands.

A hollowed cinder block on his desk was filled with whole nuts, and a hammer would assuage what appeared to be his minimal hunger. On a good day there would be an apple. His lunches and dinners frequently consisted of food on-the-run. People speak of him as working all hours and frequently sleeping at the office.

Endless Pursuit

The plans took us four years and the building three years. Fortunately, our current home and medical office were very comfortable and only three blocks away. There was no urgency to move. The planning especially took so long as he had many projects, more major than ours, going on simultaneously in the office. He was doing the Salk Biological Institute in La Jolla, California, as well as projects in India and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). He was in Dhaka or Ahmedabad for weeks at a time and decisions on our project often came to a standstill.

In the first set of plans was a handsome stone cube with the outside walls leaning inward as they ascended. The inside walls were vertical and described a circle. At the base the walls were three feet thick. Of course the amount of mass in the corners was major. The masonry contractor estimated the cost of this work alone would be \$250,000, five times the cost of the amount budgeted for the entire project.

We had nine sets of plans during the formulation of our final plans. If we were not satisfied with a set of plans, he would not modify them but insisted on starting over. For example, a bridge over a stairwell connecting two bedrooms could not just be removed. A new plan was necessary. A medical office originally planned with the house was discarded during development. Mr. Kahn had a fair number of home projects that never reached fruition. We are sure that

beside cost overruns, the need to rework his plans created time problems for his prospective home owners.

Mr. Kahn's office seemed to work with so little concern for costs that his need for money to run the office was continuous and frequently acute. On perhaps six or seven occasions, he sent an employee up by train on a Friday to get a cash payment for that week's payroll. He would get off the train at our local stop, receive it and ten minutes later get on the returning train to town. In fact, we were so concerned about his borderline financial viability that I asked his associate, David Wisdom, if he would allow us to have a good friend and accountant come to his office, at our expense, and put them on a more secure financial basis. Mr. Wisdom said we were not the first to have these concerns and offers of help. He knew Kahn would again decline and suggested we not mention it to him.

Interestingly, the "finished plans" really were not finished. After four years we realized Mr. Kahn would rework the plans forever if we allowed. Our one major reservation was that he designed only one window, rather small, and set off to the side in our dining room. The view from the rear of the house looks down a gentle slope to a stream, with a meadow and woodland beyond. He felt since the rest of the house was so open to this view that we would like a cozy enclosed dining room. It turned out, we did not think so. We felt too enclosed and knew that woods and the beautiful stream were outside that wall. Graciously, six months after moving in, Mr. Kahn with the help of Vinokur and Pace, engineers, redesigned the wall with a eight-by-ten foot glass window and two functioning wooden panels. Eating by it now is joy.

In the Purest Manner

Not being architects and looking at the facades as drawn by the drafts people was a little alarming as they looked rigid and austere. Our neighbors were intrigued with the building of the house, though most were concerned and a few alarmed by the contemporary nature of the building, situated in the middle of standard suburban architecture. One day, a friend walking by with his neighbor asked what he thought of the house as it was nearing completion. He responded he "thought he might like it when the packing crates come off."

Fortunately we went along with Mr. Kahn's assurances and

ended up delighted with the results. The warm wood, the strong stone, and the exciting fenestration's made a happy union.

The home is designed as two cubes, primarily of wood, with a stone base. The cubes articulate at a 45 degree angle. The north cube is the "living cube," and has a living room, dining room and kitchen. It has 18 foot-high ceilings. The south cube, or the "sleeping cube," has four bedrooms, two baths, with a powder room on the first floor. A very functional basement underlies both cubes. We chose cypress for its resilience to weather and beautiful color. The stone was beige and gray straight-ended pieces from the local Montgomeryville quarry.

A prominent feature in this house is the handsome fireplace and chimney dividing the living room and the dining room. It forms a massive hemi-cylinder, the flat side with the hearth facing the living room. His drawings are so complete that almost all of the stones are drawn, to illustrate size, shape and positioning. We requested that the mason fit and rout between the stones to give the impression of a dry wall. It is a handsome piece of masonry and perhaps, along with his window seat area, the centerpiece of the house.

"Good building would produce a marvelous ruin." This is one of Kahn's maxims about architecture. And nothing so solidified this for us than seeing the picture of the base of our house during construction. He loved visiting ruins and sketched many of them, including the French Medieval town Carcassonne and the Athenian Acropolis.

Ever the poet, Mr. Kahn wanting the non-English speaking Italian stonemasons to use the stone in a random manner, explained how to lay the stones multiple times, changing adverbs each time and got no recognition until he uttered "crazy" which elicited smiles and gestures of understanding. The resulting wall with seams all going down to the right gave one the feeling of being on a pitching ship. Mr. Kahn saw it and asked for it to be torn down and erected as in a diagram he drew. The masons promptly quit, but fortunately returned the next week.

We were determined to stick close to our budget, having heard horror stories about clients who hadn't done that in their experience with architects. However, we gave in to

extras when it seemed the return would justify the expense. The area under the sleeping cube was to be a crawl space for pipes, though we had wanted more basement space. Mr. Kahn could not find an aesthetically pleasing way of bringing in natural light. We pleaded, and he relented, the day before building was to start. To facilitate building and control the costs, the builder wanted to employ more economical and easier ways to enlarge the space, by using steel supporting beams and posts and cinder block walls. The straightforward Mr. Kahn said "no, this is a wood and stone house, and the basement will be wood and stone or I could never show this to my students!"

Our relationship with Mr. Kahn was a delightful one. His personality was warm and playful. He was most accepting of our input and, when not, was careful to explain why not. One of our lessons came one day when we found the people from the utility company had decided to put the meters on the front of the house. I put in a distress call to Mr. Kahn and suggested perhaps we could put them on the back of the house. We were informed "THERE IS NO BACK OF THE HOUSE!" Their placement was settled by recessing them behind a panel in the shed with small round glass windows to allow visibility.

We enjoyed being closely involved in the design and construction process. We made our kitchen purposely small. Since a couple of clients said kitchens were not his forte, we asked Mr. Kahn to layout the space for our kitchen which we then designed. It was so successful that when he redesigned a center city home for himself and Esther Kahn, he sent his drafts-people up to copy our kitchen.

Also, we liked the primitive look of white plaster we had seen in a farm house and wanted the walls inside to have a similar texture. To produce the same rough-looking finish, we had a plasterer try to use only the base coat of plaster and an old fashioned wooden trowel, which gave poor results. We ended up with a simple plastic trowel and it produced the texture we desired, leaving a rustic finish on the surface.

We treat the exterior of the house almost like a piece of furniture. Through trial and error we came up with a regimen to bring out the beauty of the cypress. About every fourth year, when the wood is developing a little irregular graying, we wash and scrub the walls with sodium hypochlorite

(Clorox). The formula is roughly four parts water with one part chemical. If there is much dirt we may add a little trisodium phosphate, as a detergent. When dry we use a colorless linseed oil, such as Cabots 3000. It requires a moderate amount of effort, but the results are well worth the work and the expense.

Our two girls grew up in this house and one especially vivid memory remains for all of us. We gave an "Open House" cocktail party when the house was just framed in. It was a glorious October day with the trees dressed in autumn colors. Our hors d'oeuvres table consisted of a long wooden board set on two saw horses. An antique commode served as the "powder room" and paintings hung from studs.

Life-giving Light

Mr. Kahn, in philosophizing about light, said "what is marvelous about a room is that the light through the window of that room belongs to the room. And the sun somehow doesn't realize how wonderful it is until after a room is made. So, somehow, man's creation, the making of the room, is nothing short of a miracle ... to think that man can claim a slice of the sun."

The natural light in our home, varying throughout the day, is always exciting, and on occasion elevated to that of a religious experience. When shafts of light pierce the invaginated windows it gives one the feeling of being in a cathedral. We never realized until we had this home, how little consideration is generally given to the kind of light that enters a house. What an extra dimension his genius created for us! When Mr. Kahn visited our home a few years after completion, we asked him how he began our house. He said "it's really structure. When I put down the places where the rooms were constructed I was thinking about the light. I wasn't thinking of beams or studs. I was thinking about what there is about the structure that will give you light."

Working with Mr. Kahn for seven years has given us a wonderful architectural education, a very livable unique house, and remembrance of a warm and special friend. Our original hope was to build a special home for ourselves, not a museum or a monument. Living in a Kahn house you didn't have a choice. Because of that, we have given our home to the National Trust for Historic Preservation with the hope it will

be preserved unchanged for future architectural students, architects and historians to study.

Once Mr. Kahn told us he really doesn't design for specific people. A house has to be suitable for more than one client. A house, created for a particular family, must have the character of being good for another family, if its design is to reflect trueness to form. This statement brought us to a different realization of how "house" can be defined. We accepted his premise but still clung to the reality that it had to work for us. We still continue to marvel at the beauty of its spaces. Our hope is that others may share in the discoveries that abound here.