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ROME AND THE LEGACY OF LOUIS I. KAHN

ELISABETTA BARIZZA
AND MARCO FALSETTI



Rome and the Legacy of Louis I. Kahn

Louis I. Kahn was one of the most influential architects, thinkers and teachers of his time. This book examines the important relationship between his work and the city of Rome, whose ancient ruins inspired in him a new design methodology. Structured into two main parts, the first includes personal essays and contributions from the architect's children, writers and other designers on the experience and impact of his work. The second part takes a detailed look at Kahn's residency in Rome, its effects on his thinking, and how his influence spread throughout Italy. It analyses themes directly linked to his architecture, through interviews with teachers and designers such as Franco Purini, Paolo Portoghesi, Giorgio Ciucci, Lucio Valerio Barbera and the architects of the Rome Group of Architects and City Planners (GRAU). *Rome and the Legacy of Louis I. Kahn* expands the current discourse on this celebrated twentieth-century architect, ideal for students and researchers interested in Kahn's work, architectural history, theory and criticism.

Elisabetta Barizza, architect, PhD, teacher of history of art and design. After working as an architect in Italy and abroad, she specialised in teaching. She is currently engaged as curator and writer in various activities connected to her research work carried out at Rome Sapienza University. In 2017, she published the book *La forma tangibile. La nozione di organismo nell'opera di Louis I. Kahn dalla svolta di Roma al progetto di Venezia*, and in 2014 (with Marco Falsetti) *Roma e l'eredità di Louis I. Kahn*.

Marco Falsetti, architect and PhD, is Adjunct Professor at the Sapienza University of Rome. His research focuses on the unresolved fragments of the modern city and the role of the 'classic' in the formation of contemporary design. Since 2012, he has been the head of his own architecture firm in Rome; his projects and drawings have been exhibited in many academic institutions such as the Istituto Nazionale della Grafica, the Faculty of Architecture of Rome, the Polytechnic University of Milan and the Polytechnic University of Bari, Italy. He publishes regular essays and articles in national and international magazines on the topic of architecture in identity-creating contexts. In 2014, he published (with Elisabetta Barizza) *Roma e l'eredità di Louis I. Kahn*. In 2017, he published the book *Annodamenti. La specializzazione dei tessuti urbani nel processo formativo e nel progetto* (*Knottings: The Specialization of Urban Fabric in the Formative Process and in Architectural Design*) on the role of paths and routes in the formation of public space. *Annodamenti* was a finalist at the National Scientific Dissemination Award 2017, held by the National Research Council (CNR).

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Figure I.1 Saverio Muratori, former ENPAS building (now INPDAP) in Bologna, designed in 1952–1957 and built in 1959–1961.

Photo by Eugenio Volpintesta.

Foreword

The common thread that ties things together

Giuseppe Strappa

The book presented here, written by Elisabetta Barizza and Marco Falsetti, deals with the relationship between the architect Louis Isadore Kahn and the city of Rome. Not so much in the sense of what Kahn acquired from Rome, on which much has been written, but in particular the input he himself provided to Italian and especially Roman architectural thinking, and the legacy he bequeathed, often in an indirect fashion, to an entire generation of architects.

I believe this is important for a better understanding of a significant turning point in the annals of Italian architecture; a point when, at the beginning of the 1960s, it was questioning its future and its own distinctiveness. These were critical years in which architects were beginning to see the cracks forming in the great historical construction that had endorsed and propagated the visions of the pioneers. It was a structure centred on an attempt to unify something that was innately complicated and multifaceted, and whose apparent coherence was revealed as merely ideological.

The early 1960s saw the end of a series of histories of architecture that attempted to identify and interpret the definitive characteristics of the Modern Movement, histories that began with *Space, Time and Architecture* by Siegfried Giedion in 1941 (but only translated into Italian in 1953) and ended with Leonardo Benevolo's *Storia dell'Architettura Moderna*, published in 1960.

Kahn's intrusive message arrived just as a new phase of Italian architecture was unfolding, which was beset by the contradictions that were becoming evident in the legacy handed down by the masters, and at a time when those architects who were more aware of the critical situation began to recognise that the practical experiments of the pioneers belonged explicitly to the cultural environment of northern Europe, and were associated with the use of malleable materials, frame constructions and lightweight, mass-produced systems. This was a modern reality accepted and shared by architects worldwide, yet which belonged to a specific geographical location, based on the Gothic, which was completely alien to the more organic, masonry-built world of the Mediterranean. It is no coincidence that the Modern Movement should have taken root, in a natural and relevant way, in the North American world of standards and steel frame constructions. On the other hand, it became increasingly evident that

there was a tendency to confine the products of the Modern Movement to formal categories that eventually became standardised and were brought to the forefront by the new edition of Walter Gropius' *Internationale Architektur* in 1965, and above all by *The International Style* by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, which was republished in 1966. The promulgation of these categories, unsurprisingly, met with stiff resistance from the 'masonry' cultures, where 'masonry' means not merely stonework, but has the more general sense of solidity of construction, apportionment and space, using structures that are simultaneously load-bearing and enclosing, a system of architecture still alive and well after the Second World War not only in Mediterranean countries, but also in Latin America, where novel experiments were made in the organic uses of reinforced concrete, as an alternative to the northern European mass-produced versions, in the work of such architects as Eladio Dieste, Felix Candela, José Luis Delpini and Ricardo Porro. This was also the case in the Indian sub-continent, where new architecture was grafted on to a pre-existing modernist tradition and a structural engineering that was particularly attentive to pre-modern construction techniques, which are still widely employed, that made use of particularly malleable forms of reinforced concrete.¹

One could say that a new kind of 'organic' construction practice, which had only recently come to the notice of critics in the developed world, had emerged in the southern hemisphere, in countries where necessity had forced architects to make the best use of frugal resources. It is therefore all the more surprising that Kahn's architecture should suddenly appear in the US, the land of metal and mass production, and show such a close kinship with these organic works that his lessons were understood and followed above all by architects working outside America. His invention of a new kind of organic architecture was not taken up worldwide. It selectively influenced those working in established architectural traditions who were predisposed to particular forms of innovation, or where it encountered a set of theories undergoing transformation, and thus was able to take root easily, markedly so in places such as Rome, which had a longer familiarity with the modern idea of an architectural organism – an idea that has taken on multiple shades of meaning and an infinite number of misinterpretations, and for this reason warrants some comment. We begin by pointing out that the idea has nothing to do with notions linked to naturalistic factors that have been used throughout the history of architecture, from Renaissance treatises to the modern 'organic architecture' introduced into Italy after the war by the Association for Organic Architecture (APAO), which had formulated its precepts,² and which was essentially based on categories borrowed from the visual arts. Giedion's definitions identifying two distinct 'manners' in architectural history, rational-geometric and irrational-organic, illustrate the difference between the meaning of 'organism' within the Modern Movement and the sense it had acquired in the context of the built environment, which had to do with the consistent, communicable qualities of a building, which, far from being irrational, were able to influence the development of very different forms of architecture. An organism was understood as a set of parts

subjected to 'organisation', a completely modern term unknown before the Enlightenment, meaning a formula for coordinating various components and joining them together in a mandatory interrelationship. The cultural milieu to be found in Rome was one which researched most rigorously into the modern idea of the organism; it was developed in the 1920s and 1930s and accepted by the post-war generation as a kind of deep-seated cultural substratum, a sense of continuity that seldom surfaced in writings or expositions, but which discovered in Kahn's idea of architecture hidden correspondences that led to an original critical appraisal of international modernism.

From its very beginnings, the major innovation of the Roman school was perceiving unity of form as a combination of multiple components; they saw architecture as a system of necessary relationships between components, working together towards the same goals. This idea was formulated in the interwar years, especially by teachers at the Rome School of Architecture such as Gustavo Giovannoni, Arnaldo Foschini, Giovan Battista Milani and Vincenzo Fasolo, and was handed down to succeeding generations almost as a kind of methodological infrastructure, despite repudiations, divisions and accusations of introducing methods that were outdated and academic. This substratum enabled them to accept and understand the novelty and sophistication of the forms that Kahn was presenting, which, in other contexts, had merely meant a return to the past. Giovannoni in particular had roundly criticised the contemporary separation of legibility, distribution and construction that was the result of rejecting the combinatory-unitary idea of the organism.

These ideas are also of cardinal importance when dealing with the stability of buildings. Giovan Battista Milani, who in his seminal work *L'ossatura muraria* (*The Building Frame*), published in Turin in 1920, discussed the technical aspects of project design, explained that stability was an architectural issue, and had to conform to more general rules governing the requisite correlations between different parts of a building. It is no coincidence that a historian such as Vincenzo Fasolo declared that we need not study ancient forms of organisation in order to understand the history of architecture, but they helped us become aware of how certain building forms were 'necessary', and even though they were limited in number, their essential characteristics could be understood and used to help deal with contemporary problems.³

We can be sure that Kahn was never aware of the theoretical background behind the creation of a new *Roman modernity*, but he must surely have understood its essence and its affinity to his own work through contact with the buildings of EUR, or the Foro Italico, or Rome University. Also, his classicism was of a kind unknown to the modern architects, in that it borrowed from the ancients not the delicate ordered forms of Greek architecture (which was above all Mies van der Rohe's source of inspiration), but rather the massive, heavy, deeply shadowed volumes formed by the use of continuous walls of masonry. Kahn's interest in Rome did not in reality concern a repertoire of forms or their historical significance, but the very principles of the discipline, which he subjected to a critical appraisal, attempting to reconstruct them by

going back to their origins. As Vincent Scully noted, the architecture that Kahn designed during his stay in Rome was “heavy, massive, symmetrical.”⁴ It was as if he understood ‘empathically’ the modern potential in systems of construction that gave a solid shape to static structures, and at the same time to the spaces they enclosed; he was encouraged to experiment, unconventionally, with the use of concrete as the basic substance of modern construction, as opposed to the standard steel frames favoured by the International Style. The form of classicism acknowledged by Kahn was completely modern and led to unforeseen results. While the standard architectural orders of the Greek world impart a general idea that explains and contains everything, the massive walls of the Romans suggest many different ideas and together provide a personal interpretation of the origin of forms, and establish the principles of a radically new way of composition. In his studies of Roman masonry, Kahn was not investigating ancient history, but examining an embryonic stage of the very idea of construction itself.⁵ So, his language appeared to be anything but a dead language; instead, it was a universal language that could be understood all over the world, since it was based on the original sense of the words themselves.

Kahn’s 1950s stay in Rome at the American Academy, which coincided with a breakthrough in his own work, took place in a period of maximum ‘Americanisation’ in Italian cultural life, when the triumphal modernism of steel, glass and curtain walls arrived from the US. Yet in Rome at that time, Kahn had direct contact with, and discovered the design potentials of, the massive wall constructions of the ancient monuments, the Basilica of Maxentius, the Pantheon and the Baths of Caracalla. What he read there was radical and nonconformist, and more concerned with the architect’s craft itself; from it he derived his solemn, silent architecture, those huge spaces that had nothing ancient about them, yet within them one felt immersed in the mighty river of time. His previous experiences seemed to have foreshadowed, almost anticipated, this encounter. There was the influence of Philadelphia itself, which had always cultivated a kind of independence in its architecture, from its distant beaux arts traditions, and where there was a mentality which ensured that technical progress and new social conditions could always be reduced to a communicable set of rules. As has been mentioned, there was also the considerable influence of the teaching of Paul Philippe Cret. Yet Kahn seemed to distance himself from the significantly history-based buildings that Cret had constructed in Washington: the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Federal Reserve Board and the Central Heating Plant, whose facades to a certain extent prefigured certain features of Kahn’s monumental masonry. His concept of form was an abstract quality extraneous to all forms of measurement, which is present in the mind of the architect before any project is begun (the project itself being, instead, physical and measurable). Above and beyond any superficial similarities, it has nothing in common with the idea of ‘a priori synthesis’, which was being developed in Italy at that time.⁶

In fact, any notion of historical process was foreign to Kahn’s world; the original forms that he used were so generalised that they seemed to have been

always present in the mind of man, although never appearing in his history. The presiding idea in his compositions seems to instinctively contain the notion of organism, lying preformed in the deepest layers of his consciousness, before coming to life in his designs (it took on an identity, unique and particular, or, in his words, was “endowed with dimension”), and then being physically created in a building. It is in this substrate that experience and culture are contained and metabolised, a place where many things are tied together: the practical awareness of our collective history, our individual experience, and our personal aspirations as human beings and architects.

Let us take the case of the little synagogue built in the 1930s at West Oak Lane, Philadelphia, for a Jewish community originating in Eastern Europe. The Ahvath Israel Congregation⁷ consists of a solid, massive volume which ruthlessly replaces two housing units in a continuous row of standard terraced houses that occupies the entire building plot. Kahn makes no reference whatsoever to the traditional shuls,⁸ the synagogues used by the small Eastern European congregations, and widespread also in the US in the immigrant communities of the cities, and which were originally much like ordinary residential houses. He set up no relationship with the existing buildings, nor did he make any reference to what had existed before. Instead, it appears that he was acting in accordance with his own situation as a ‘new American’, as well as his deeply felt Jewish heritage. This seemed to be the source of a universal message that contained the paradox of monumentality without a sense of place – the memory of institutions, distilled through the filter of the peregrinations, the eternal journeys of the wandering Jew, who moves through territories and lives in cities without ever belonging to them. Its permanent, inseparable form appears in the non-place, the core of our memories. Tradition is not the legacy of human experiences that are defined in history; it is an unknown land of myth where every experience seems suspended, waiting. Rather than a source of knowledge, it is the promise of a revelation.⁹ This explains why the practicality of measurement and the objectivity of scale appear to have less value than the faultless focus of invention: the form, the vital idea that links everything together and on which everything is dependent.

The use of the word ‘form’ seems connected to some of Kahn’s researches in Rome regarding methods of design. Two concepts for him are at the source of design in architecture: *form*, the universal idea, and *shape*, which is the arrangement of its architectural results. While the form is impersonal, the design is the personal or individual interpretation, which is exclusive and concrete compared to the general and abstract nature of form. One can see that the example Kahn provides to explain his idea of design is the classic one given by certain Italian schools of typology. *The house* is the generally shared concept of ‘house’, the complete set of all its basic characteristics that occur non-dimensionally, derived from an ideal, original pattern. On the other hand, *a house* is the defined, concrete form of this general concept that is created by design, which involves the choice of materials, the solution of problems of distribution, and the attention to the needs of all its eventual inhabitants, not only of a single individual.¹⁰

Every building that is built thus contains, and updates, a shared core of features that transcend the purely functional and lead back to a common and 'generic' model, which is the origin of buildings that are different from each other while having similar generators of space; the model is not given any *shape*.

This does not constrain the space into closely following use, the source of many problems, and it also explains why Kahn's buildings age so well, because they are predisposed to appearing to be ruins, something we expect from great architecture that, even as its materials deteriorate, allows us to sense the presence of an ideal underlying principle that is uncorrupted by time.

For Kahn, the creation of a work advanced by step after step, moments of progressively acquiring order, of being aware how the material making up the architectural organism has to methodically arrange itself into the material of systems, structures and elements. This is not an analytic or constructive process that evolves by aggregation and consecutive improvements, but one that is synthetic and deductive, deriving from *form*, from the primary assumptions of the general plan, and in the case of projects involving major civil and religious institutions, from a symbolic, monumental core, to which are connected the axial points of the composition, and the surrounding structures, formed of a series of compartments that complement and collaborate with one another, and together partake of the function and the statics of the work of architecture.¹¹ The functions assigned to structures that collaborate with one another are not a means of justifying the solutions derived from the geometry of their plan (as has been written), but are a result of an organic synthesis, in which the task of creating the solidity required for the stability of the structure coincides with the serving function of the spaces, which, in one single constructive action, thus solve the various problems posed by the architectural plan.

This idea of organism, understood as a set of indivisible elements that work together with one another towards a common purpose, was part of the common heritage of modern Roman architecture, before the post-war crisis. Kahn had perceived it as a designer in buildings like the Pantheon, where the massive thickness of the perimeter walls take on a particular 'hollowed out' form with remarkable geometric inertia, in order to eliminate the pressure of the dome and serve the main interior space (served) with a series of coffers (serving). The part thus participates, congruently and proportionally, in the whole, something one can see, brought up to date with new spatial and technical considerations, in the reception area of the Conference Hall by Adalberto Libera, where a serving external perimeter wall, thick enough to include stairs and elevators, does not only help define the central space, but at the same time has a static function as well as acting as a vertical connection. As with Kahn, the *core*, the *meeting place*, is the space where people gather and where the architecture converges, the central place of ritual, whether civil or religious, which gives a monumental quality to the building by arranging its spaces, specifying movements and designating directions.

In his often intransigent relationship with whoever had commissioned a work,¹² Kahn maintained that the life that was to be lived inside this new

architecture would have the same organic nature as the building itself; not its functions, but the supplementary activities, and therefore the collaborating spaces, would form a supportive social environment of rooms centred round the hall used for religious services, everything ordered around the core space of the community. Kahn wanted everything to work together in a single, communal structure, following a process that, outside of any historical allusions, at one step at a time, identified the features of the organism that was being created. This process was difficult for the proponents of the International Style to understand. Because of these common underground roots, it was in fact the message of Kahn the American that burst upon the complacent Italian scene at the end of the 1960s, as a form of 'collaboration' in which a specifically individual style could be created within the international perspective. Behind its apparent assurances, his message was strangely disquieting, and appeared as a messianic sign of rebirth to a generation of architects who were eager for change and to students who had lost their way in the ambiguous transition phase to new academic authority figures.¹³ In this general state of disorientation, where some architects tried to escape from the language of internationalism by falling back on the vernacular, or to refound the discipline on the shoulders of the architect as builder and artist, or to seek the answer in the roots of organic order, Kahn could not but be an object of fascination to young designers in the late 1970s, who were retracing the forgotten paths of artistic research and its multifaceted associations with a past where everything was coexistent, synchronous and strangely timeless. Kahn seemed to offer a way out of the crisis. Instead of solutions based on technique or excursions into other disciplines, or retreats from historicism, he raised up the defensive ramparts of an elegant, noble body of work that would not allow itself to be corrupted by the world of production and standardisation. He introduced a new dimension into the profession of architect: an art that was imbued with the epic, with its source in powerful civilised beliefs and themes that were formidable and majestic.

This was not in fact a completely unknown path to take; it had been hinted at in a renewed interest in the absolute forms of the architecture of the Enlightenment (as noted by Purini in the interview included here): the symbolic value of the circle and the sphere, of the square and the cube, the triangle and the pyramid. In that very same year of 1966, there appeared the excellent translation of *Philosophie der symbolischen formen* by Ernst Cassirer, Aldo Rossi published his *L'architettura della città* and the Italian edition of Emil Kaufmann's *Architecture in the Age of Reason* was printed. One year later, there appeared perhaps the most celebrated and earth-shattering work to date, the Italian version of *Architecture. Essai sur l'art di Etienne Boullée*, which Aldo Rossi turned into the manifesto of an 'exalted rationalism', which was a demand for autonomy in architectural projects. The sphere of Newton's Cenotaph, a perfect and universal form that does not suggest a dome, does not perform any function or derive from any consideration of stability, was adopted as the declaration of independence that had long been awaited. Aldo Rossi introduced it into his entry for the competition for the Town Hall of Scandicci (1968).

But many designers in those years recognised its significance as a unifying symbol, as did, two years later, Virgilio Vercelloni and Giancarlo Tuzzato in their project for the Sports Palace in Abbiategrosso. Already, however, in 1965, 20 years before Quaroni's designs for Gibellina, Antonio Quistelli had come up with plans for a church in Rome, with simple volumes dominated by a sphere to house the congregation, and one year later Costantino Dardi used a sphere as a centrepiece of designs for the Chamber of Deputies in Rome. Even though there are obvious differences in the geometries employed and undeniable differences in method from Kahn's concept of the architectural organism, the similarity of the results show the shared desire for a new idea of architecture as art, an art in which all of history exists simultaneously.

The Rome Group of Architects and City Planners (GRAU) had in any case already put forward the idea of a meta-historical 'figurative antecedent', where the figurative legacies of the past and the present coexist and form the material to be used in the project.¹⁴

In 1969, the journal *Controspazio* was published, with the aim of providing an alternative to the other reviews of the day. Its very title announced the desire and hope for new spaces, different from and counter to those of the contemporary city. The leading article, almost a manifesto, was in fact about Louis Kahn. It was a declaration of intent with very little text, just a series of illustrations showing the brickwork and exposed concrete of the Dhaka Assembly Building then under construction. It looked like the aftermath of a mysterious catastrophe. The article that followed posed the problem of the political role of the new capital of East Pakistan, seen as an unacceptable instance of a new cultural colonialism;¹⁵ this heralded the advent of a conflicting point of view that would become an ongoing theme in Italian debate. Ironically, the work of Kahn, who refused to enter the Valle Giulia Architecture Faculty of Rome University because he was asked to take a position on the American invasion of Cambodia,¹⁶ became the benchmark of the most radical and uncompromising architects, the most politicised, who did not identify themselves with the mainstream led by Bruno Zevi.

The truth was that the political message that Kahn delivered was much more difficult and insightful than any facile statement of principle. It was the proof, agonising and functioning, of a refusal. His works of architecture, especially his later creations, intrinsically and even constructively had nothing whatsoever to do with the market, in a country where production and the market are everything, even shared values, even art and culture. Against a world where the only heroic achievement possible seems to be personal success, Kahn counters with the epic poetry of solemn shapes and collective institutions. His buildings are autonomous, silent and monumental, in which people can reside and participate in living, yet which do not appear to be necessarily built to be lived in. In the world of capital and big business, Kahn was the outsider, the newcomer, looked upon with admiration, but above all with suspicion. A heretic, a rebel who died alone, heavily in debt, someone who, befittingly, paid in person the cost of his own choices. For this reason also, during a global crisis of faith in

continual progress, when one faces the question of the ethical responsibility of architecture, the legacy of Kahn to Rome can still be regarded as a precious asset and a lesson to be reread with great care. Even today, it can still be used to conduct a fruitful discussion on the specific organic features of Italian architecture, as the conversations and reflections included in this book amply testify.

Notes

- 1 Curtis J.R., 'Modern Architecture and the Excavation of the Past: Louis I Kahn and the Indian Subcontinent', in Kries M., Eisenbrand J., von Moos S. (eds), *Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture*, Basel, Vitra, 2012, p. 235.
- 2 Zevi B., *Verso un'architettura organica*, Turin, Einaudi, 1945.
- 3 Fasolo distinguished between central organisms with a heavy or elastic covering, and central organisms covered by a dome, where the static-constructive aspect, even before it becomes the means of constructing the building, is seen as an element of a language, an integral part of the type present in the design (c.f. Milani G.B., Fasolo V., *Le forme architettoniche*, Milan, Vallardi, 1934).
- 4 Scully V., 'Louis Kahn and the Ruins of Rome', in *Engineering & Science*, Winter, 1993.
- 5 "I am amazed that a room can be built, that a pilaster can emerge from a wall" (in Ronner H., Jhaveri S., *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Work 1935–1974*, Basel, Boston, MA, Birkhäuser, 1987).
- 6 There appear to be some similarities with studies carried out at the time in Italy, connected to the theories and teaching of Saverio Muratori. However, such analogies, though intriguing, are merely apparent, since in Kahn's interpretation of form there really is no acknowledgement of a formative process that takes place by stages of transformation of the reality that the construction determines in a historical context.
- 7 Solomon V.S.G., *Louis I. Kahn's Trenton Jewish Community Center*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2000.
- 8 Wertheimer V. (ed.), *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- 9 Tafuri writes: "What European observers have always underestimated in Kahn's work is the deep-seated 'American-ness' of his desperate attempt to recapture the mythical dimension. That this is a myth with no collective foundation is only one of the disturbing aspects of Kahn's thinking" (Tafuri M., *La sfera e il labirinto*, Turin, Einaudi, 1980).
- 10 Kahn L., 'Form and Design', in *Architectural Design*, April 1961.
- 11 Strappa G., *Unità dell'organismo architettonico. Note sulla formazione e trasformazione dei caratteri degli edifici*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1995.
- 12 Ronner H., Jhaveri S., op. cit.
- 13 Francesco Tentori, however, was already, in 1960, acutely aware of the persuasive power of Kahn's teaching, when he spoke of "a process of cellular organisation of an organic tissue" and referred to a Cartesian conception of the whole form, in which there coexisted past and contemporary traditions "transfigured into a new likeness that was absolutely original and never before seen" (Tentori F., 'Ordine e forma nell'opera di Louis Kahn', in *Casabella Continuità*, 241, July 1960).
- 14 GRAU, *Isti mirant stella, architetture 1964–1980*, Rome, Kappa, 1981.
- 15 D'Amato C., Petrini S., 'Dacca Kahn', in *Controspazio*, 1(1), June 1969.
- 16 Latour A. (ed.), *Louis I. Kahn, l'uomo e il maestro*, Rome, Kappa, 1986.

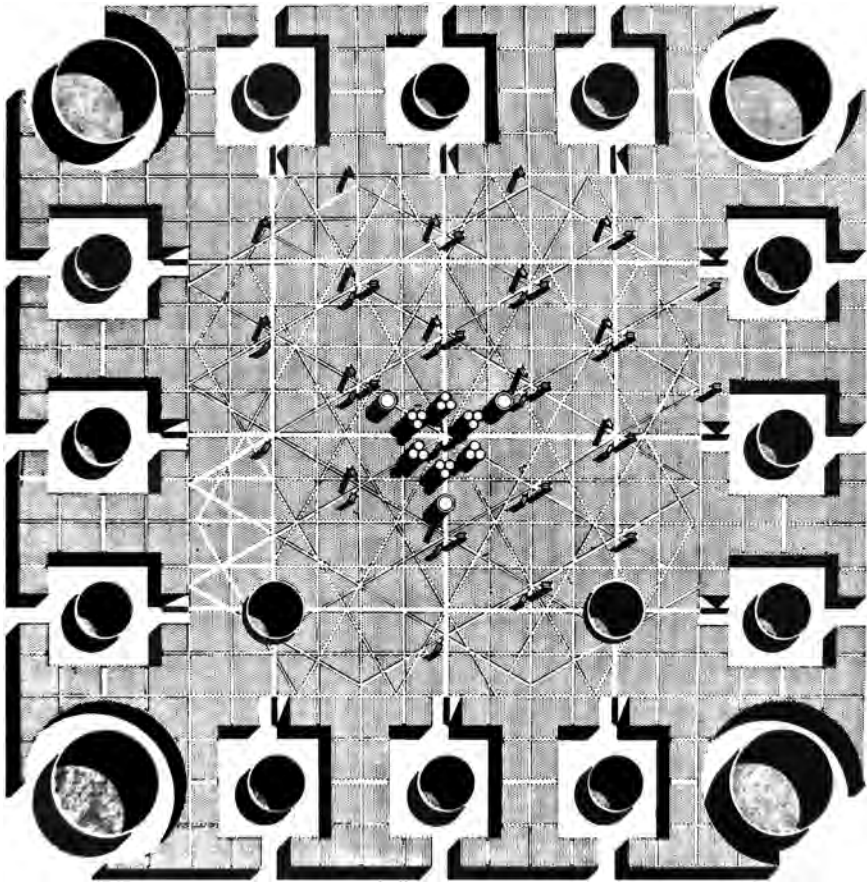


Figure I.2 Louis I. Kahn, Square of the Midtown Development City Tower, Philadelphia (1952–1957).

Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Housed in the Harvey & Irwin Kroiz Gallery, the resources of the Louis I. Kahn Collection are used with the permission of the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania.

Introduction

Tomorrow never knows

Much has changed, in Rome as elsewhere, in the four years since this book was first published in Italy. In the meantime, certain circumstances have come to light (or re-emerged into it), and this has led to the reopening of dialogues that were left unfinished.

When the conference *Rome and the Legacy of Kahn* was held in November 2013 (the success of which led to the decision to write this book), the question of what this legacy consisted of had not been sufficiently discussed in Italy as a subject in its own right, but rather had been relegated to just one of the many influences that any architect or generation of architects are exposed to in the course of their lives. Over the years, in fact, the Rome–Kahn relationship has been examined at various times, but never as a separate, independent subject, especially as regards its two most important aspects: what Kahn ‘took’ from Rome and what he ‘left’ us with. The few works that have dealt specifically with the question (among which, Scully’s pivotal essay ‘Louis Kahn and the Ruins of Rome’) were always written from an American viewpoint, which, for obvious geographical and cultural reasons, have managed to go into only certain details concerning Kahn’s stay in the city.

Few modern architects can be said to have enjoyed so formative a relationship with a city as Louis Kahn with Rome. Obviously, his architectural upbringing began in his developmental Philadelphia years, but the critical juncture in his work, the real ‘point of no return’, was his experience in Rome, during which everything that had been evolving in his mind for some time found an answer and a representation. For Kahn, this relationship and its progress were something unique; one cannot say the same, for example, for other architect–city associations, even powerful ones such as Le Corbusier with Paris or Marseilles, or Mies with Berlin or Chicago.

From the 1960s onwards, Kahn also exerted a major impact on Italian architecture, and nowhere more so than in Rome, where in many ways he influenced its future direction and development. The basic problem was finding a way out of the crisis that the International Style found itself in, and re-establishing a modern relationship with the past, and here Kahn appeared to be offering Italian architects a solution that enabled them to see things at

2 Introduction

a proper distance (perhaps because it came from an outside source). There were certainly many other movements and ideas circulating in Italy along the same lines as those of Kahn, but all of them, for diverse reasons, failed to take into account certain key aspects, which made their message contentious and difficult to share with others. For the young students who belonged to a troubled generation, growing up in a world of constant change, the message of Kahn seemed nothing less than a revelation. His achievement, as we shall see in the course of this book, can be ascribed to a number of factors, perhaps the most important being the fact that he himself was a troubled figure, capable of veering between the serene observation of the enigmas of time and the desire to undermine the dominion of form and material.

In recent years, following the success of the posthumous completion of the Roosevelt Memorial in New York City in October 2012 (designed by Kahn in 1973–1974), there has been a steadily growing re-evaluation of Kahn's work on a global scale. Many critical studies have stressed the importance of what Kahn's architecture teaches us, pointing out that the inability of much modern architecture to address important issues of energy conservation, natural disasters and other growing threats has only confirmed the validity of Kahn's lesson. Following the detailed research paper *Louis I. Kahn*, by Robert McCarter, published by Phaidon in 2009, many other publications have appeared with in-depth studies of Kahn, thanks to some meticulous documentary work. Among them are two books: one written by Michael Merrill, *Louis Kahn: Drawing to Find Out, the Dominican Motherhouse and the Patient Search for Architecture*, published in 2010, and another by Maria Bonaiti, *Louis I. Kahn (1901–1974)*, published in 2013. Another important landmark was the travelling exhibition *The Power of Architecture*, the first major retrospective of Kahn's work in two decades, encompassing over 200 objects related to Kahn's buildings and projects in the form of architectural models, plans, original drawings, photographs and films. The exhibition, first shown in Weil am Rhein in Germany in the summer of 2012, moved to several other cities in Europe and the US, and came to an end in 2017 with two important fall showings at the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia. In 2014, the year the Italian version of this book was published, there appeared two books, published by Routledge, dealing with the evolution of Kahn's use of concrete, which had marked repercussions in the field of construction history; they were *Louis I. Kahn: Exposed Concrete and Hollow Stones, 1949–1959* by Roberto Gargiani and *Louis I. Kahn: Towards the Zero Degree of Concrete, 1960–1974* by Anna Rosellini, probably the most significant recent developments in the ongoing research into Kahn's work. The publications and events of recent years have led even American intellectuals (who were always reluctant to acknowledge Louis Kahn as a confirmed founder of a school of architecture, such as had been the case with Frank Lloyd Wright in the twentieth century) to take steps to make up for lost time. We feel that interest in Kahn's work and in his ideas is still strong, and more than ever relevant