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**The Philosophy of Louis I. Kahn and the Ethical  
Function of Architecture**

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requirements of the degree of Master of Architecture.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis attempts a Buddhist interpretation, commentary and reflection on a lecture by Louis I. Kahn (1901-1974) at Pratt Institute, entitled "1973: Brooklyn, New York." This lecture provides the framework and point of departure for a discussion of Kahn's philosophy. With the aid of Buddhist thought, this investigation argues that the ethical function of architecture begins with the effort of the architect to know his or her self. The juxtaposition of Buddhist philosophy and Kahn's lecture on architecture also seeks to present a way in which Buddhist thought might engage and illuminate the issues of ethical action in architecture. In doing so, the possible contributions of Buddhist thought to contemporary architectural discourse may present themselves.

## **Résumé**

Ce mémoire se veut à la fois une interprétation, une réflexion et un commentaire, selon la pensée Bouddhiste, sur une conférence de Louis I. Kahn (1901 - 1974) prononcée au Pratt Institute et intitulée "1973: Brooklyn, New York." Dans un premier temps, le texte issu de cette conférence servira de point de départ et de structure à une discussion de la philosophie de Kahn. Cette discussion, effectuée à l'aide de la pensée Bouddhiste, pose comme prémisse que la fonction éthique de l'architecture commence par l'effort de l'architecte de se connaître soi-même. Enfin, la juxtaposition de la philosophie Bouddhiste et du texte de Kahn permettra d'éclairer les questions relatives à toute action éthique en architecture, révélant ainsi les contributions possibles de la pensée Bouddhiste au discours architectural contemporain.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis attempts a Buddhist interpretation, commentary and reflection on Louis I. Kahn's lecture, "1973: Brooklyn, New York," given at Pratt Institute in New York during the fall of 1973. This lecture was given to architects and students several months before his death and was among Kahn's last few lectures in which he shared his philosophy.

There are many excellent studies<sup>1</sup> of Kahn's architecture, in which his philosophy was used only as justifications for his projects. Scholarship has only concentrated on speculating how he designed buildings. However, in his writings and lectures, Kahn emphasized the importance of developing an open attitude towards architecture that transcends the specificity of practice. In this respect, Kahn's philosophy has not been sufficiently studied. This thesis will focus on his philosophy and its potential consequences, rather than on his built architecture.

Kahn's philosophy consists of a complex gathering of scattered insights and reflections on life, architecture and the creative process. These thoughts are articulated in terms of his personalized vocabulary which at times could be cryptic, but not totally inaccessible. Therefore, one has to take this into account when one is reading his lecture. I do not seek to explain his whole philosophy, but choose only to concentrate on what I interpret as his views on the ethical function of architecture. Kahn's lecture at the Pratt Institute

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<sup>1</sup> Noteworthy among the many excellent studies of Kahn's architecture are: Vincent Scully's *Louis I. Kahn* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), Alexandra Tyng's *Beginnings: Louis I. Kahn's Philosophy of Architecture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), and the collection of essays in David B. Brownlee and David G. De long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli Publications, 1991).

will form the framework and point of departure for a dialogue. With this dialogue, I hope to illuminate what the ethical function of architecture is and how the architect could put it to daily use.

The usefulness of Buddhist philosophy, both to illuminate Kahn's intentions and to draw their implications for contemporary practice, will hopefully be self-evident in the text. I am aware of the speculative nature of this juxtaposition, however I believe it would nevertheless be most fruitful. The intention is not to proselytize, but to highlight the penetrating insights of Buddhism's "ontological study of man" and its possible contributions towards the questions of our human condition and ethical action in contemporary architectural discourse.

Louis Isadore Kahn was born on February 20, 1901 in Estonia, to Jewish parents of mixed Slavic, German, Scandinavian, and Persian blood.<sup>2</sup> His family emigrated to Philadelphia in 1904. From 1920 to 1924, he attended architecture school at the University of Pennsylvania. The architectural training he received was in the tradition of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He became a registered architect in 1935.

Kahn became an architect in the 1930's. The 1930's was a period of transition between the waning of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts tradition and the arrival of "modern architecture," commonly known as the International Style. Kahn had to reconcile his Beaux-Arts training in respecting the legacy of humanity, with the seduction of the exciting International Style that emphasized originality. He also had to reconcile his more intuitive approach

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<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Tyng, *Beginnings* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984), 1.

to design, with the more rational, reductive and analytical method of the International Style. Perhaps it is because of this context, that led him to try to understand and articulate the creative process of architecture and its responsibility to our human condition. This resulted in the development of a personal philosophy.

From 1955 to 1974, Kahn began teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. This facilitated the development of a personal speculative philosophy. He quickly acquired a reputation as a thinker and a large following of architects and students. Kahn was always both a teacher and an architect. He designed many buildings in many countries which range from houses to museums and civic centres. Many of his buildings are among the finest examples of modern architecture today, such as the famous Kimbell Art Museum at Fort Worth, Texas, the Salk Institute for Biological Studies at La Jolla, California and the Sher-e-Bangala Nagar in the Capital of Bangladesh. Among the many awards and honorary degrees he received, was the Gold medal from the American Institute of Architects and the Royal Institute of British Architects. He died of a heart attack on March 17, 1974 in New York.<sup>3</sup>

My interest in Kahn's philosophy stems from his unique position of reflecting on architecture and its relation to our existence and experiences. Kahn's reflections did not end as mere abstract speculations or superficial justifications, but as an understanding that formed the very ground from which his architecture grew. His "method" was simple. The architect has to first understand and reflect on one's existence and human condition. To be aware of the consequence of one's actions in terms how one can make

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<sup>3</sup> John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Pub., 1979), 114.

architecture for the common well-being of humankind. Only then should one designs.

## **View, Meditation and Action**

My interpretation, commentary and reflection on Kahn's lecture will be organized in three parts, "View," "Meditation," and "Action." By "View," I mean to explore what is the ethical function of architecture. By "Meditation," I mean to reflect, understand and to be mindfully aware of the forces that come into play in the ethical function of architecture. By "Action," I mean the question of how to put the ethical function of architecture into practice. In order to participate and critically engage with our world fully, "with all its joys, allurements, and sorrows, (where) every situation is useful."<sup>4</sup> This is achieved by skilfully working with the architect's medium creating environments to reveal the humanness in us to build a world worth living in.

## **Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism and the Madhyamika School**

I will employ Buddhist philosophy, especially Tibetan Tantric Buddhism,<sup>5</sup> as an aid in this interpretation, commentary and reflection. Buddhist

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<sup>4</sup>Tarhung Tulku Rinpoche, foreword to *Kindly Bent to Ease Us, Part One: Mind*, by Longchenpa, trans. Herbert V. Guenther (Berkeley, California: Dharma Publishing, 1976), viii.

<sup>5</sup> Tantric Buddhism is the Indo-Tibetan culmination of Indian Buddhism. In other words, Tantric Buddhism is the further development and clarification of the first insight of its founder, Gautama Buddha. Tantric Buddhism is entirely different in nature from the Tantrism of Indian Hinduism (Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 2).

Buddhism was founded by an Indian Brahmin by the name of *Siddhartha* (Skt.) in 6th century B.C.E. He was called Buddha, the "awakened one," because he was awake to the cause of suffering in this world. He realized that the cause of unhappiness lies very much with our conceptualizing mind, which divorces us from engaging directly with our world. It was his aim to bring all sentient beings to liberation and to arrive at a joyous and peaceful state, by uprooting all causes of misconceptions where we can be free by just being here. However, one must not misunderstand that we should all get rid of all concepts and thoughts. That would be impossible.

philosophy offers one of the most rigorous and penetrating insights into the "concrete human situation of man's lived existence,"<sup>6</sup> which I believe is necessary for an understanding of the ethical function of architecture.

Early Buddhism is known as the *Sravaka* (which means 'hearer,' it was formerly called *Hinayana* or the Small Vehicle) school. From this school evolved the *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) school. The *Mahayana* school however still encompasses the early *Sravaka* school. In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, the two schools *Sravaka* and *Mahayana* are called the *Sutra* school. In addition, the Tibetans incorporated and evolved Indian Tantrism into their Buddhism which they call the Tantra school. For Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, the gradated system of study begins with *Sravaka* to *Mahayana* before one could study the Tantra. It is important to note that though Hindu Tantrism and Buddhist Tantrism might have originated from the same Indian roots, Buddhist Tantra has evolved to become totally different from Hindu Tantrism. Thus they should not be mistaken to be the same.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to explain the differences between the various schools of Buddhism. It would suffice to note that the different

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What he suggested is to recognize the nature of these thoughts, realize that they are just concepts, that we should not become attached to them or take them too seriously and to work with them.

The name Buddhism is a convenient categorization, it is not a philosophy in the sense of a system of concepts, it is more a way of living. According to Buddha, "one is one's own refuge, who else could be the refuge," because "you should do your work, for the Tathagata (One who has gone free of concepts) only teach the way." In fact, this teaching is only "a raft which is for crossing, not for holding on." It is essential not to believe with blind faith, which is a question of not seeing, but to see and to know, not just to believe. (Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1). Of relevance to architects today is the blind indiscriminate borrowing of philosophies (e.g. deconstruction) and theories (e.g. chaos theory) to legitimize their architecture, without regards for its consequences on the well-being of our human condition.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life* (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1976), 2.

“schools” are a building-upon and furthering of the understanding by many centuries of Buddhist thinkers on the same root philosophy expounded by its founder, Gautama Buddha. The differences between the “schools” are in the way they attempt to clarify and refine the subtle nuances of the original philosophy. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is the culmination of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, while Zen Buddhism is the culmination of Sino-Japanese Buddhism.<sup>7</sup>

Buddhist thought in its most refined *Mahayana* form is the *Madhyamika*.<sup>8</sup> also known as the “Middle Way” or “Centrist” School. Within this refinement, there were further developments resulting in a few different schools, one of them is the *Prasangika Madhyamika* School of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. The development of the *Madhyamika* was attributed to the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna in the 2nd century C.E. The *Madhyamika* is the clarification of Buddha’s teaching on living the “middle path,” which is not to fall into the extremes of indulgence or refrainment, nor the extremes of sensualism or annihilation. It does not propose that “nothingness” or “the giving up of everything” is the way to go. The idea that Buddhism is nihilistic is a common misunderstanding. The very popular Buddhist term *sunyata*, often translated as “emptiness,” has led to more misconception than comprehension. The word “openness” is closer to the spirit of *sunyata*. This definition is used by Buddhist teachers, Chogyam Trungpa and Thich Nhat Hanh.

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> The Buddhist terms used in the discussion are in Sanskrit, unless specified otherwise.

The *Madhyamika* is not a substitute for any specific system of constructive metaphysics. Its essential purpose is to bare the basic truth that underlies all such systems which is the system-building tendency in man. The *Madhyamika* has a "mission of criticism ... to bare the inherent inconsistencies in the positions of those who cling and hold fast to the relative as absolute."<sup>9</sup> The criticism is to enable everyone to set free one's basic urge (of system-building) from its moorings in abstractions. The intention is to reveal the determinate nature of a specific system, so that one ceases to lay an exclusive claim concerning one's own way. At the same time, this also reveals the uniqueness and the individuality of every system's nature, purpose and function.<sup>10</sup>

"The *Madhyamika* does not oppose system-building, but would itself institute systems, not as an end in themselves, but as the means to widen one's understanding (and) deepen one's comprehension. Analysis, synthesis, and criticism as well as different constructive systems all have their respective places and functions in this comprehensive understanding, which is comparable to *akasa*, the very principle of accommodation (which depends) on everything that lives, moves and fulfills its being. The revelation of this all-comprehensive nature of true understanding that is the basic meaning of *sunyata* (emptiness, openness) in regard to views (preconceptions) is the underlying idea of *Madhyamika*'s rejection of all views (preconceptions) and not having any view (preconceptions) of its own."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nagarjuna's Philosophy as presented in The Maha-Prajnaparamita-Sastra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993), 69.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

I have also adopted as a strategy the Buddhist tradition of the commentary of a text. The commentarial tradition of Buddhist texts provides for the method of building upon the understanding based on previous commentaries and the original ideas. The intentions of these Buddhist commentarial texts were for the authors to illuminate the contemporary relevance of these thoughts.

A point to note is that my Buddhist interpretation of Kahn's lecture is traditional in that it follows the goals of commentarial text as mentioned, as well as the format of commenting on each paragraph of a lecture by a Buddhist teacher. However, it is untraditional because my Buddhist interpretation is not of a Buddhist text but that of an architect's lecture. My intention is that the interpretation and commentary are to examine the relevance of Kahn's philosophy to the ethical practice of architecture today.

We may argue that one could enlist any religion or philosophy as an aid. There are already a few excellent studies of Kahn's work and its relation to Gnosticism<sup>12</sup> and the Kabbalah.<sup>13</sup> Kahn himself did not explicitly state his source of inspiration, which I believe is probably eclectic. My choice of such an interpretative framework is not to demonstrate any relation of Kahn's philosophy with Buddhism. Rather it is to use Buddhist philosophy as a tool of interpretation, in terms of its relevance to the existential realities of 20th century humanity.

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<sup>12</sup> D. S. Friedman, *The Sun on Trail: Kahn in the Gnostic Register* (University of Cincinnati, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Burton, "Notes from Volume Zero: Louis Kahn and the Language of God," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 20 (1983), 70-90.



One may argue that the common goal of all religions and philosophies is to provide for the self-understanding and spiritual growth of humankind. All these thoughts are different perspectives trying to answer our common human questions. The aim of my interpretation and commentary of Kahn's lecture is to address the human condition and its relevance for the practice of architecture. Thus the use of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is primarily to aid in this self-understanding, and conversely to disclose the possible contributions that Buddhist thought might have to the understanding of the theory and practice of architecture.

It is important to read and understand my reflections on Kahn's thoughts and lecture from our own experiences. Thus it would be useful to ask, "Does what is said have anything to do with my daily life as a human being and an architect?" For "abstract ideas can be beautiful, but if they have nothing to do with our life, of what use are they?"<sup>14</sup> We should even ask, "Do the words have anything to do with eating a meal, drinking tea, being human, being here, living life, designing spaces for people, or how to make architecture for the well-being of all of us, both as user and architect, and for our environment?"

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<sup>14</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion*, trans. Anh Huong Nguyen (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1992), Introduction.

## TEXT AND COMMENTARY

### 1973: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

A lecture at Pratt Institute, Fall 1973<sup>15</sup>

#### VIEW

#### Architecture is about life

1. I discovered something one day. I was in Maryland getting another sort of honorary degree, and I had some prepared speech, which of course I wasn't going to read. I knew what I was going to say. They had a new building, the architects did. They had built a new building and it was there — I think the room was in the center — where the celebration, the degree giving, was held. The room was about a hundred and twenty feet or so long and maybe fifty feet wide and had a balcony. On two ends of the balcony there were musicians — brass instrument musicians on either end — and they played some baroque music of Venetian origin, and it was absolutely wonderful. Nobody played excellently. I heard little sounds that weren't really too good; but altogether in the way it occupied the hall, this thing made me think of something to say which was not what I had intended, and I think that seeing you all puts me in the same frame of mind.

The lecture room was filled with students and architects, expecting to learn from the famous architect Louis I. Kahn about how he designed his architecture. Kahn surprised them by not showing slides of his buildings and talking about how he built them. Instead he related a discovery he made.

Kahn begins his lecture by relating an experience he had in a room. He describes carefully the details of his experience, from the dimensions of the room right down to the music played. Although nobody played the music

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<sup>15</sup> Alessandra Latour, ed., *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews* (New York: Rizzoli International Pub., 1991), 320-331. Reprinted from *Perspecta 19: The Yale Journal*, 1982, 89-100.

excellently, Kahn wants to talk about how the music “altogether” occupied the room. For Kahn this gathering and coming together of music, people, space and room is such that architecture is a very concrete experience which “gives form to a way of life.”<sup>16</sup> Where architecture, like art, is “the making of life and it comes from Life.”<sup>17</sup> Architecture is thus life itself, for “we live to express.”<sup>18</sup> Kahn seems to imply that architecture is the expressing and the revealing of the creativity of life. That it would enrich our lives and contribute to the well-being of everyone.

### **Impermanence and letting go**

2. I was going to show slides, but I'm not going to show any slides because I am bored with them, you see, myself. Maybe this is because I really don't think that telling you how I do things means very much.

Why did he not want to show slides and talk about his buildings like any famous architect? Why was he “bored” with his slides? Perhaps this is because he believes that the architect should not rest on one's laurels but learn to “let go” of one's achievements nor reduce one's architecture to a formula. This is because architecture is a creative act which has always to respond to the impermanent and ever-changing nature of the world. By “letting go,” the architect may thus be open to the rich and creative possibilities present in architecture and its programs, to respond to the human condition of our dynamic present. Kahn seems to imply that the cause of this being something more important about architecture than telling us the way he did his buildings.

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<sup>16</sup> Louis I. Kahn, “Space and Inspiration,” *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>18</sup> Louis I. Kahn, “Silence and Light,” *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, 235.

## **The ethical function of architecture**

3. I believe that a man's greatest worth is in the area where he can claim no ownership. The way I do things is private really, and when you copy you really die twenty deaths because you know that you wouldn't even go so far as to copy yourself, you see, because anything you do is quite incomplete. But the part that you do which doesn't belong to you is the most precious for you and it's the kind of thing that you really can offer, because it is a better part of you, actually. The premises anyone can use. Though you may be someone who thinks about them, you only think about them because they are part of a general commonality which really belongs to everybody.

"Man's greatest worth" concerns the well-being of everyone. The question of the common well-being is of course in the realm of ethics. Kahn is obviously trying to articulate the ethical function of architecture, its importance and conditions.

Kahn says what he did was private. Every architect has one's own way of making architecture. We should believe and have confidence in what we are making. The making of architecture is expressing one's self. Architecture is not about copying from others. By copying, what we make will never be complete. This is because it is not our expression but that of another and we will never know how the other thinks.

Then Kahn emphasizes, "There is a part of us that does not belong to us, which is the most precious." Kahn seems to be uttering a contradiction. On one hand, he said that the architect should be original. That one should not even copy oneself, such as generating a "marketable style." On the other hand, the most precious gift we could offer is the "unoriginal," something that does not belong to us. Perhaps he is implying that we do not exist as

independent and isolated beings. We exist interdependently with both living and non-living beings, and with events. Therefore we are part of a "general commonality" that really belongs to everybody. This "commonality," for Kahn, is but "man's facts."<sup>19</sup> He is perhaps referring to the facticity of Being,<sup>20</sup> which is the fact that we exist and are living.

To reflect on this notion of "commonality." According to philosopher, Martin Heidegger, "All being is in Being."<sup>21</sup> Being is the primordial condition or "ground" that allows everything else to exist.<sup>22</sup> We could also call it Existence. For Heidegger, everything else, such as people, flowers, cups, and architecture are beings and they are manifestations of Being.

For Buddhism, there is *tathata*, also known as radiant light, "as it is" or "is-ness." We can also understand this as Being, Being-as-such,<sup>23</sup> or Buddha-nature (the nature of being awakened to "is-ness"), which is the facticity of Being, the pure fact of Being. Our Being-as-such is a very direct condition that is not subject to the dualism of this and that (subject and object), it just is. "That within the heart of every being as one's very real nature there is *tathata* (is-ness), the unconditioned *dharma* (Being),"<sup>24</sup> which as actualization of our

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<sup>19</sup> Louis I. Kahn, "How'm I doing, Corbusier?" *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, 299.

<sup>20</sup> The capitalization of 'being' as 'Being' does not mean any external entity. It is only for the convenience of this discussion. As rightly pointed by Joan Stambaugh and should be noted, "Capitalizing 'being,' although it has the dubious merit of treating 'being' as something unique, risks implying that it is some kind of Super Thing or transcendental being." (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein and Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), xiv).

<sup>21</sup> George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana Press, 1978), 31.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Lemay and Jennifer A. Pitts, *Heidegger for Beginners* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing Inc., 1994), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nagarjuna's Philosophy as presented in The Maha-Prajnaparamita-Sastra*, 320.

Being, is “a way of expressing the basic truth of the ultimacy of the unconditioned (Being).”<sup>25</sup> In the Buddhist context, the term *dharma* includes all of the things which Heidegger defined as beings, and it also includes the objects of the mind as well. They are all actualizations of Being.

It is important to note the inclusion of the projections of our minds as *dharma*, which arise from ourselves and play a very important part in how we perceive and respond to the world. For Buddhism, the “direct expression (actualization) of our Being” is a very simple and mindful way of living. It is the simple case of: when you eat, you eat, and when you sleep, you sleep. Buddhism is about a “mindful being here” without our preconceptions clouding our actions or worrying us. This does not mean one should forget the past or not worry about the future, and just live the moment. The present is where our past meets the future. Being mindful is not only to be aware of the past and the future, but to realize that we can only work with the present to fulfill the future. It is very powerful when we are that aware, for we will be able to see the world for what it is and thus our architecture could respond to the challenges of the world for our common well-being.

Perhaps when Kahn said that this “commonality” is “what we are part of” and “which really belongs to us,” he would like us to be very clear that Being or Existence is not a concept. It is not an entity above, under, inside or outside us. There is always the possibility of misunderstanding “Being.” In Western metaphysics, for instance, Being is deemed as “having the character

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<sup>25</sup> K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nagarjuna's Philosophy as presented in The Maha-Prajnaparamita-Sastra*, 320.

of a ground as the first and most universal ground of all beings, (which) lent itself to a static interpretation."<sup>26</sup>

Being, in this case, is the very living process. Being is us. We are Being. Being is a very dynamic and ever-changing "groundless" ground that we are and are part of. Being is an encompassing "commonality" of human conditions that we share. This includes everything from how we treat our planet for the survival of humanity to our responses to the different perspectives of a shared reality called our world.

We need to emphasize the consequences of our "interdependence" and "facticity of Being" which are the "most precious" that we "can really offer." In terms of "interdependence," it is an understanding of the ethical function of architecture which is for the well-being of everyone and not for our own egotistical ends. In terms of the "facticity of Being," we understand that the way to the well-being of others starts with the well-being of ourselves. The way we are and how we make architecture comes from the direct expressing and revealing of our Being in our actions.

Kahn reminds the architect that one is first human and then an architect. Being human, we belong to a commonality such that we cannot live and create in isolation. As Rilke advised the young poet against looking outside for views about his poems, one's art lies in "go into yourself."<sup>27</sup> For Kahn, the apparent paradox is that this is precisely the part of us that we can offer.

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<sup>26</sup> Longchenpa, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us, Part Three: Wonderment*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther (Berkeley, California: Dharma Publishing, 1976), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Rainer Marie Rilke, *Letter to a Young Poet*, 6.

Architecture today has been criticized for many things. It has been criticized for being boring and functional, monotonous because of its homogeneity, and alienating because we find it hard to relate to and find meaning in it. Other criticisms say that architecture is just formal play and decoration, or technological showmanship, or building for purely economic interests. The architects, on the other hand, respond by pointing out the limitations inherent in building and planning regulations, and in developers who are interested only in maximizing floor area for profit.

However, architecture has to be more than just building for the sake of shelter, profit or novelty. It has the responsibility not only to provide for our physical needs, but also address the cultural and spiritual needs of how we can live “well” and act in our contemporary multi-cultural and technological world. It is time to be aware of the consequences of our actions as architects to the global whole and to contribute to the well-being and survival of humanity. Kahn perceived that architects may have forgotten the aim of architecture and the ground on which it exists. His lecture seems aimed at reminding architects about the “ground” of architecture.

We should perhaps return to Heidegger, a philosopher who had reflected on the notions of building and dwelling. According to Heidegger, building is not an activity solely for shelter. The essence of building is about how we live in this world. For “only if we are capable of dwelling, then can we build.”<sup>28</sup> “Dwelling” here refers to “living” and not to “dwelling – as a place to stay.” Perhaps this was what Kahn was implying, for us to re-discover “the most precious and better part” of us, doing architecture that “doesn’t

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 160.



belong to you" but to the well-being of humanity, contributing to the way of living. To "offer" architecture to humanity, the architect has to know himself, "to know how to dwell (to live) in order to build." This puts the whole foundation of architecture in an ontological and existential context, which I believe is what Kahn's insight also reveals.

"Dwelling," for Heidegger, "is the basic character of human existence,"<sup>29</sup> and to dwell is to dwell "poetically." Dwelling "poetically," however, is not to dwell in fantasy as some might misconstrue, nor is it solely in poetic moments of epiphanies. The word "poetic" from the Greek word *poiesis* means to make or to bring-forth. This making is different from *techne* which conveys the sense of organization and knowledge to make something. *Poiesis* is a making, a bringing-forth to reveal. What it reveals, according to Heidegger, is our relation to mortals, divinities, sky and earth. The poetic "is a measuring"<sup>30</sup> in relation to these four elements. The "taking of measure is the poetic in dwelling."<sup>31</sup> Poetic dwelling as the "taking of measure" with mortals, divinities, sky and earth is thus the accountability of our actions to our world and our planet.

This way of dwelling calls for a very direct living-as-it-is, seeing things as they are, seeing the inter-relatedness of events, phenomena, and of oneself and the other. It has to be a very conscious and "awake" way of living in the world. Architecture as *poiesis* is for the well-being of humanity. The next question is, "How does *poiesis* inform us how to live and make architecture in our daily lives?"

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, "...Poetically Man Dwells...", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 215.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

## **Ethics is common happiness and joy**

4. And in getting up to speak, I had to say — after the music had been played, this great music — that it told me something that was terribly important to me. I felt of all, very joyous. I felt that which joy is made of. And I began to realize that joy itself must have been the impelling force that was there before we were there. That somehow joy was in every ingredient of our making. That which was the ooze, you see, without any kind of shape or direction. There must have been this force of joy, which prevailed everywhere within the context, that was reaching out to express. Somehow that word joy became the most unmeasurable word. It was the essence of creativity, the force of creativity. I realize that, if I were a painter and I were to paint a canvas of a great catastrophe. I couldn't put the first stroke on the canvas without thinking first of joy in doing it. You cannot make a drawing unless you are joyously engaged. And somehow, when I thought that art was a kind of oracle, a kind of aura, which had to be satisfied by the artist, and that the artist made something and he dedicated it to art, an offering to the art as though it were something that preceded the work, I began to realize that art cannot be art unless it is a work, and not something absolutely there that is in the blue somewhere.

The ethical function of architecture is about "Joy." From the experience of the room and the music in it, Kahn felt joyous. He realized why the "not perfect" music in the room was "absolutely wonderful," this was because there was joy in the making of the music. We could ask, "If the music was not perfectly made, where is the joy?"

Joy comes from playing our best, and not from chasing a conceptual goal of "perfectly played" music. This comes from playing to our potential and being true to what we are. To enjoy what we are doing, we must be mindful of the task at hand, not worry about the future or the past, but savour the mindful moment of being alive and doing what we love. This is the actualization of Being. The joy is from us enjoying what we do and this joy will radiate and be felt by others.

Kahn realizes "that joy was in every ingredient of our making." Joy is the "essence ... and force of creativity." Creativity is living. At every moment, we are creating and are created. Joy comes from the actualization of our creative energy. To question, think and to create is being here and being alive. The joy that we feel comes when we actualize this creative process of living. The making of architecture has to be creative, in response to and engage with the dynamic nature of life. Originality is about going back to our origin of being alive. To copy others or ourselves, is only to reuse "dead" concepts.

Joy is the aim of every activity of ours. We cannot make architecture without joy. We should not make architecture if we do not enjoy it, because we would not care what we make. Only with joy will there be quality in our work, which is our responsibility to humanity. Kahn feels that we must understand why joy is important to the making of architecture. For as an offering to the well-being of humanity, architecture, like art, cannot exist as mere ideas, it has to be a product that shares and radiates the joy in its making.

How is joy related to the ethical function of architecture? We should perhaps look at *poiesis* again. *Poiesis* is the act of making or production that aims at an end other than itself.<sup>32</sup> Architecture is *poiesis*. The *poiesis* of architecture is the making of a building for an end other than making a building. This end is what constitutes our ethical actions. Ethics is usually defined as an action towards a common good. In our world of anti-system, anti-value, and suspicion, we will be asked, "Whose common good?" This common good is actually a common happiness.

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<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. by J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976), 208-209.

According to Aristotle, Ethics means that “every art (*techne*) and every investigation, and similarly every action (*praxis*) and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good.”<sup>33</sup> He adds, “The highest of all practical goods ... is (*eudaimonia*) happiness.”<sup>34</sup> This happiness must not be confused with being merely comfortable and contented. It is a state of ultimate satisfaction and joy, enjoying the richness of life and living to our fullest potential.

For Aristotle, “Happiness is the virtuous activity of the soul.”<sup>35</sup> The Greek word for “virtue” is *arete* which also means “excellence.” “To have a soul or *psyche* is to be alive or animate.”<sup>36</sup> Read another way, happiness is to live excellently. It is important to note that by “excellence,” I mean we have to care for how we live as well as the consequences of our actions. It is an “excellence” that is not about just doing our best, but with care for the well-being of our humanity. For me, Kahn’s notion of joy is similar to the “happiness” of Aristotle’s Ethics. Happiness or joy is thus the continuous process of living and realizing our fullest human potential, experiences, and growth.

As Kahn had said, architecture is a work. The *poiesis* of architecture is the making of a product as an aid to happiness.<sup>37</sup> The question then becomes, “Towards whose happiness (joy) would the making of the product contribute, that of the maker or of the user?” For Aristotle, “The good man is a producer of happiness – but of his own happiness and not, or at best incidentally, that

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

of others.”<sup>38</sup> Aristotle recognized the fact of human nature that human beings always aim for their own happiness. The ethical implication of *poiesis* starts with one’s excellence and joy in making the product, for both material gains as well as personal achievement and growth. The product that was made excellently would transmit the love, joy, care, pride and creative imagination in its making. That it would arouse these qualities in the user, influencing one’s attitude towards work and enriching our lives.

It is important to note that happiness and joy are not the sweet and saccharine “love-dovey” state we might conceive happiness to be. In the Buddhist context, ethical action is being compassionate. However, this compassion (as it is the case for happiness and joy) has nothing to do with achievement at all. It is spacious and very generous. When a person develops “real” compassion, he is uncertain whether he is being generous to others or to himself, because compassion is a generosity without direction, without “for me” and without “for them.”<sup>39</sup> Thus the qualities of love, joy, care, pride and creative imagination are a very direct expression of ourselves without the mediation of any preconception. On the other hand, this does not mean we need to suppress our preconceptions. We have to recognize these preconceptions as preconceptions, be aware of how they come about, and to work with them accordingly. Therefore happiness and joy are very honest, down-to-earth, open encounters with reality to meet its challenges. Helping others, or working for the well-being of others, is not done because that is what compassion is, but because we are compassionate. This is the case for ethical action.

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<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala Pub., 1987), 98-99.

For Aristotle, Ethics is a practical science, a way to act, a living of a complete life encompassing the whole complexity of a human being. The only happiness that we can achieve is our own. For the happiness of others, one can only live excellently and joyously, and radiate that excellence and joy through our actions. As a producer (*poietaes*), the architect makes architecture by creating an environment, "forming a way of life," to help others achieve happiness. The common good is ultimately the common happiness (joy) of humanity.

The ethical function of architecture starts with the architect. "The cause (of production) is in the producer and not the product."<sup>40</sup> The word "ethics" is from *ethos* which means "character" or "habit." According to Heraclitus, "*ethos* is man's *daimon*," which is to say that "character is man's fate."<sup>41</sup> We could interpret this to mean that in order to achieve the fate of happiness, we need to live excellently, which requires us to master our character or human nature. As for *ethos* as "habit," it is about the attitude we have towards work and life.

The ethical function of architecture is about architecture being a work (a product) made by an architect living excellently in happiness and joy. This work will radiate the joy in its making to the users, enriching their lives and contributing to their well-being. Knowing that happiness and joy is the ultimate aim and the ground of the ethical function of architecture, how does one work towards it? Kahn suggests that the architect start with "knowing oneself."

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<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 260.

## MEDITATION

### Architecture is embodied experience

5. I thought then that the first feeling must have been touch. When you think of it, it probably is the first feeling. Our whole sense of procreation has to do with touch. Touch desired to be so much in touch that eyesight came from touch. To see was only to touch more accurately. And then I thought that these forces within us are beautiful things, which you still can feel although they come from the most primordial, unformed kind of existence. It still is retained in you.

Kahn believes that self-knowledge stems from the feeling of touch. Perhaps he is referring to the significance of our embodied experiences. When we make or do something, it is an embodied experience. Embodied experience means that it involves the whole of our mind and body. However, most of the time, we do not pay attention to what we are doing, because we are thinking of something else. We forget our body. Often we are not even here, because we live in the fictions of our preconceptions. Kahn reminds us that architecture is embodied experience. To make architecture is to make for "touch," for our body. It is never conceptual. Architecture directly affects how we live. For him, to be able to see was only to touch our Being more accurately. The question is: "The architect does not physically build but only draw plans for a building, how then does one make<sup>42</sup> architecture?"

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<sup>42</sup> The use of the word "make" instead of "practice" is intentional. Kahn makes a distinction between making and creating architecture, and the practice of architecture. For "making architecture," it involves the notion of embodied making, the involvement of our whole being in that making, the intensity of the love and joy of making. This is contrasted with "the practice of architecture" which he choose to define as a detached and "professional" activity of designing architecture for the sake of making money and other gains, not for the love of it. Thus the importance of understanding the ethical responsibility of architecture.

For Kahn, drawing architecture should be embodied, we “draw as we build, from the bottom up, stopping our pencils at the joints of pouring or erecting, ornament would evolve out of the love for the perfection of construction ...”<sup>43</sup> The “architect must read the life that comes into his works through his plans.”<sup>44</sup>

He also said, “an architect creates space ... (but) architecture has its limits. When we touch the invisible walls of its limits then we know more about what is contained in them. A painter can paint square wheels on a cannon to express the futility of war. A sculptor can carve the same square wheels. But an architect must use round wheels. Though painting and sculpture play a beautiful role in the realm of architecture as architecture plays a beautiful role in the realm of painting and sculpture, one does not have the same discipline as the other ... One may say that architecture is the thoughtful making of space. It is the creating of spaces to evoke the feeling of appropriate use.”<sup>45</sup> For architecture is embodied experience.

Why did Kahn start with touch? What is the significance of embodied experience to architecture and its ethical function? We may remember Kahn had said, “The only thing I feel you can do in the making of something is to be yourself.”<sup>46</sup> Architecture, like Tantric Buddhism, perhaps should start with “knowing oneself.”

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<sup>43</sup> Louis I. Kahn, “How to Develop New Methods of Construction,” *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interview*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Louis I. Kahn, “New Frontiers in Architecture, CIAM in Otterlo 1959,” *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interview*, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Louis I. Kahn, “Form and Design,” *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interview*, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Louis I. Kahn, “Our Changing Environment,” *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interview*, 154.



Tantric Buddhism "is founded on practice and on an intimate personal experience of reality, of which traditional religions and philosophies have given merely an emotional or intellectual description. For Tantric Buddhism, reality is the ever present task of man to be."<sup>47</sup> It stresses "individual growth and tries to realize the uniqueness of being human."<sup>48</sup>

Tantra, in Buddhism, means both "integration and continuity."<sup>49</sup> According to Herbert Guenther, a renowned scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, Tantra "begins with the concrete human situation of man's lived existence, and it tries to clarify the values that are already implicit in it."<sup>50</sup> Also, Tantra does not look towards any external system, which is a case of conceptualization and reduction of phenomena, nor speculate about any transcendental subject beyond the finite person.

Tantric Buddhism attempts to look at "the finite existence of man as lived from within, not succumbing to another kind of subjectivism ... The world of man is his horizon of meaning without which there can neither be a world nor an understanding of it so that man can live. This horizon of meaning is not something fixed once and for ever, but it expands as man grows, and growth is the actuality of man's lived existence. Meanings do not constitute another world, but to provide another dimension to the one world which is the locus of our actions. Being is not some mysterious entity, it is the very beginning and the very way of acting and the very goal. It is both the

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<sup>47</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, ix.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

antecedent of our ideas and what we do with them for the enrichment of our lives."<sup>51</sup>

Buddhism is clearly aware that "the human problem is one of knowledge ... that knowledge is not merely a record of the past but a reshaping of the present directed towards fulfilments in the emerging future. This is the meaning of Tantra as continuity."<sup>52</sup> In other words, there is no escape from Being, Tantra as continuity is the fact of Being and we have to work with it. Therefore, "the problem is not man's essence or nature, but what man can make of his life to realize the supreme values that life affords."<sup>53</sup>

How is Tantra related to touch? Tantra defined as integration is about the concrete present of both our mind and body as a whole entity. Tantra defined as continuity is the fact of our lived existence. When Kahn talks about touch, he reminds us that architecture and life are about our concrete lived experiences, for "without our body we would be nowhere,"<sup>54</sup> and that "the body is not something man has, but man is his body."<sup>55</sup> Our "body is a continuously on-going self-embodiment and self-expressiveness of (our) psychic life."<sup>56</sup> Thus our whole and integrated mind-body<sup>57</sup> embodied experience opens us to more dimensions in our world, for us to respond more accurately to life.

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<sup>51</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> The term "mind-body" with the hyphen in between seeks to express the mind and body as a very direct integrated whole and never as two separate faculties. Mind-body is one.

With the phrase “to see is to touch more accurately,” Kahn reminds us that our lived world is neither wholly subjective (a mind) nor objective (a body), but an integrated mind-body whole. For “to see” is only to help us use our body better. In fact, it is because we privilege our mind by relying a lot on its conceptualizing and categorizing that our actions are clouded by misconceptions and preconceptions not confirmed by our lived experiences. This eventually leads to misunderstanding, erroneous perceptions and problematic actions.

In order to work towards the ethical making of architecture, we need a clear and awake mind. We need to be constantly aware of our conceptual minds and its projections, to see things as they are, and to directly meet the challenges of the ever-changing world. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that architecture is a lived experience and not a conceptual exercise that we offer to the well-being of humanity.

### **Facticity and the direct expression of our Being**

6. I was writing a statement of appreciation for someone who helped me in doing work on the Roosevelt Memorial in New York, which I am now engaged in doing. I had this thought that a memorial should be a room and a garden. That's all I had. Why did I want a room and a garden? I just chose it to be the point of departure. The garden is somehow a personal nature, a personal kind of control of nature, a gathering of nature. And the room was the beginning of architecture. I had this sense, you see, and the room wasn't just architecture, but was an extension of self. I'll explain this because I think it has qualities that don't belong to me at all. It has qualities which bring architecture to you. It has nothing to do with the practice of architecture, which is a different thing entirely. Architecture really has nothing to do with practice. That's the operational aspect of it. But there is something about the emergence of architecture as an expression of man which is tremendously important because we actually live to express. It is the reason for living.

The facticity of Being is the fact that we are living. By moving, breathing thinking and creating, we are expressing life, which is the actuality of Being. Thus the facticity of Being is its actuality. Both are one and the same in terms of our direct, embodied, primacy of experience of the world as it is. Kahn reminds the architects that we are all whole and integrated mind-body organisms.

He further relates this understanding to the creative process of architecture. As an example, he discusses how he chose a room and a garden as a design for a memorial. The design came about because he just felt that it had to be. He discovered that "the room wasn't just architecture, it was an extension of self," and the "feeling" for the room that "just has to be" has a "quality" he feels would bring architecture to us. This quality, Kahn feels, has to do with the "emergence of architecture as an expression of man." That "we live to express." I would interpret this notion of "we live to express" as the awareness of the facticity and the actuality or expression of our Being.

The feeling that something "just has to be" in Kahn's decision perhaps is about the direct expression of our Being. This is a very direct and open (unmediated by concepts) respond to the need of the situation, in this case, a memorial. He believes that if we recognize this "direct expression of Being" in our making, it will bring architecture to us. For how best it is to design for a "need" then to feel that "need" directly with our mind-body, unmediated with preconceptions.

To understand the "facticity of Being," it should be compared with the notion of an experience defined as noetic-noematic. The noetic-noematic

experience has the notion of an experiencer-experiencing-the experience. That is there is a watcher, a reflecting being, a thinking being observing our actions. In contrast, the facticity of Being and its actuality does not have the watcher. It is simply the thinking being experiencing. The experience is unmediated by preconceptions. As an example, it is the pre-reflective action of protecting our face when something flies towards us. In terms of everyday living, it will be the very mindful attitude of "when I eat, I eat, when I drink, I drink." This opens us to the richness of the very task at hand.

The relation between the facticity of Being and our body is such that the body "expresses" or "radiates" our state of mind and Being. For Tantric Buddhism, this facticity of Being is referred to as "radiant light." It is "a term for the excitatory nature of a living organism, by which is meant the capacity to increase or decrease in illumination. This does not imply a change from inertness to responsiveness ... but like that of a person glowing with joy, shining with happiness, radiating well-being. The luminousness of Being is the absence of all obscurity and its radiancy is its power to illumine, rather than a quality ascribed to it. The 'radiant light' belongs to us in our Being, but it diminishes in direct proportion to our being as circumscribed by categorical thinking. To the extent that we are 'lit up' we are happy and feel transported, blissful; but to the extent that 'the light goes out,' we feel bored and depressed."<sup>58</sup>

We could perhaps say the same for works of art, craft, and architecture which radiates the joy, love, care and creative imagination in its making. This might even be the criteria to engage art. Of course we should not forget these

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<sup>58</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 11.

qualities come from the maker. Perhaps this is why Kahn thought that knowing about his “spontaneous” action might bring architecture to us.

For Kahn, the direct expression of our Being in our actions is what makes architecture, not the practice of architecture which he deemed as just operational. To him, “The emergence of architecture is an expression of man which is tremendously important.” That is not to say that all we have to do are to express. Rather it is more a question of knowing what we express and how we express.

The significance of understanding the “direct expression of our Being” is that we could act spontaneously and creatively. This spontaneous action is possible only if we can see past our preconceptions that many times would make us think, see and act differently from the way things really are. This facticity of Being has an “open-dimensional quality,” that would help the architect see the real need of each activity that one is designing for, and even question our present outdated and stagnant architectural programs.

It is good to know about the “expressing and revealing of Being,” but how do we participate in the world for the well-being of others and us?

### **From touch to sight - two truths and the creative imagination**

7. So there is then this striving, you might say, from touch to “touch,” and not just touch. In this sense there is the development of what could be sight. When sight came, the first moment of sight was the realization of beauty. I don’t mean beautiful or very beautiful or extremely beautiful — just beauty, which is stronger than any of the adjectives you may put to it. It is the total harmony that you feel without knowing, without choices — just simply beauty itself, the

feeling of total harmony. It is like meeting your maker, in a way, because nature, the maker, is the maker of all that is made. You cannot design anything without nature helping you. And there is a great difference between the design and form and shape. And that's what we'll talk about.

To participate in the world with the direct expression of our Being, Kahn said we have to strive from touch to "touch," to be in touch with our Being. That is when sight develops and with sight comes the realization of beauty. For out of the facticity of Being and its open-dimensionality comes "sight." With sight, creative imagination and the expressing and revealing of our Being comes beauty.

To be able to realize "just beauty" which is not some "objective beautiful," is when we are free from the dichotomy of this and that, not judging or craving. This is perhaps what Kahn called the "total harmony that you feel without knowing, without choices." This beauty is not the concept of the beautiful nor an ideal. "Simply beauty itself" is perhaps the total openness and harmony that comes from the direct experience of the world as it is, free from concepts, and enjoying its richness. Kahn said it is like meeting our "maker," which he calls "nature - the maker of all that is made." Kahn's reference to nature does not seem to refer to a tendency towards "naturalism," with the natural world as the universal absolute and model, rather it alludes to what we call Being. Kahn adds, "you cannot design anything without nature helping you." Design comes from our creative imagination which is from the maker, the direct expression of our Being.

If architecture strives for an unveiling and a revealing of Being from the "direct expression of our Being" which is "free from concepts," does it mean

that the architects must live in “complete blankness” and “away from the world?” If imagination is about image-making, how then does the architect express Being through making with one’s creative imagination? Is there a contradiction?

For Gampopa, an eleventh century Tibetan Buddhist master, there is no contradiction. He explained: “All that appears and can be talked about is (dealt with by) concepts. Without concepts there cannot be any ‘appearance,’ concepts are the mind. The mind is unborn, and the unborn is openness (*sunyata*, emptiness, the open dimension of Being). Openness is the absolutely and uniquely real. The absolutely and the uniquely real that is not something or other, is the presence of the plurality (of the phenomenal world). When this plurality is present, it has not parted from what is (the openness of our Being). When you understand how the two truths (ultimate and mundane) are indivisible, you have brought the things of this world into perspective. When you maintain this perspective, you are fully attentive (being here, engaging our lived world concretely). The result is the abolishment of (not worry about one’s projected) hope and fear.”<sup>59</sup>

What are the two truths? In the Buddhist context, “the true nature of things, *sunyata* (emptiness, openness) is *tathata* (is-ness) which is comprehended at two different levels, mundane (worldly, conventional) and ultimate.”<sup>60</sup> The two truths, the mundane and the ultimate truth are about engaging with the world.

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<sup>59</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 33.

<sup>60</sup> K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nagarjuna’s Philosophy as presented in The Maha-Prajnaparamita-Sastra*, 317.



The “mundane (worldly, conventional) truth (has) bearing not only about the basic elements of existence, the conventional entities, but also about concepts and conceptual systems.”<sup>61</sup> For mundane truth is in the recognition of the interdependent and conditioned-originated nature of our everyday life and that we require the use of conventional entities to function and to communicate. The “import of this truth is to realize the ultimate is not to abandon the mundane ... (but to) learn to see with eyes of wisdom.”<sup>62</sup>

Ultimate truth is the recognition that *tathata* (is-ness) is that things are as they are. “That things are neither existent nor non-existent, neither arising nor perishing, that all things are in their ultimate nature purity itself, where all determinate modes of knowing become extinct.”<sup>63</sup>

In other words, as ultimate truth, we realize that concepts are constructs of our minds and are thus illusions, but that does not mean that we say the world is an illusion and give up on it. We need concepts to communicate, function and know. We cannot escape the world. In fact, the two truths are about engaging directly with the world at these two levels.

Regarding the “direct expression of Being,” Herbert Guenther explains that though the direct expression of Being gives the “idea of pure perception, that is to be ‘without concepts,’ this does not imply an utter blankness or the proverbial emptiness of the mind ... Rather it is the full appreciation of the totality, from which subsequent abstractions can be made ... (that may cloud

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<sup>61</sup> K. Venkata Ramanan, *Nagarjuna's Philosophy as presented in The Maha-Prajnaparamita-Sastra*, 317.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

our minds), but the same concepts may also be helpful and pointers to what is ever-present, the self-creativity of the mind which I experience as embodying itself in my body or (as) concepts and constructs of the mind. The full appreciation and awareness of Being are not reducible and caught up in abstractions."<sup>64</sup> Concepts and our minds are the manifestations of Being, they are one and the same.

What then of imagination?

Perhaps we should recognize the two sides of imagination. For the sake of discussion, I will call them imagination and creative imagination. Imagination for a person is the arising of concepts and images when one encounters the world. One could then choose to believe these images as either the reality or as an abstraction of the reality.

Imagination for the artist and architect is the ability to create with images and concepts in their work to evoke and cause feelings and concepts to arise. Imagination by itself is not good or bad. To be irresponsible with the consequences of our imagination is a problem, especially in our present world when anything imaginative is heralded as the spark of genius. There is a difference between having creative imagination and being just imaginative. Being creative is to create something that has an end other than itself. However being merely imaginative is only image-making and it is an end in itself. The former carries a responsibility for its actions. As for the latter, it is for its own sake. It has an attitude of anything goes, that what we do does not

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<sup>64</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 34.

matter. However we must remember that there are consequences to our actions and that they matter.

Creative imagination, on the other hand, comes from being able to “let be and let go” of our preconceptions, and to be open enough to see the depth and richness of our world. For the normal person, it is the ability to appreciate the world for what it is and see value in living in it.

In terms of the creative artist and architect, it is the ability to work with images, symbols, concepts and materials to create a work. For “creative imagination resolves duality into unity and spontaneity, and in its renewal of spontaneity, it is freedom itself, always new because ever the same, always the same because ever new and different.”<sup>65</sup> Creative imagination is never that of dreaming, but has a dream-like quality which requires an intelligent and critical view of the world, to be able to see through the illusions weaved by preconceptions, concepts and images.

The creative architect has to be able to see the world for what it is, and like a magician, uses the creative imagination to skilfully manipulate one’s media to create environments to evoke and conjure up feelings, concepts and images, to reveal the richness and values of the world to others. The work of creative imagination is not subordinate to our illusions, it is an unselfish offering to the well-being of humanity. “(Creative imagination is) an attitude of directness and unselfconsciousness in one’s creative work.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Longchenpa, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us, Part Three: Wonderment*, trans. and annotated by Herbert V. Guenther (Berkeley, California: Dharma Publishing, 1976), 185.

<sup>66</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Dharma Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 1.

Regarding working with concepts, for Gampopa, "Concepts are to be seen as a benefactor, not as dispensable. They are to be seen as a necessity, as a beloved. Concepts are just concepts. They are friends; they are fuel to appreciative discrimination (which is *prajna*, the knowledge to deal with a given situation appreciating its multi-dimensionality)."<sup>67</sup> We could even "use positive concepts to banish bad ones, but (we have to be careful, for) one may be fettered by positive concepts and by negative concepts."<sup>68</sup> At the same time, we need to note that "both (the positive and negative concepts) are considered the working of the mind, and this working, unborn,<sup>69</sup> is to be considered as absolute Being (the facticity of Being)."<sup>70</sup> Thus concepts that arises in our minds cannot be got rid of, and that we have to work with it. "This is openness in action,"<sup>71</sup> the direct expression of our Being.

The architect has to recognize the power of the images one conjures and what one creates. That is one's responsibility. According to Chogyam Trungpa, "Creating a work of art is not a harmless thing. It is a powerful medium. Art is extraordinarily powerful and important. It challenges people's lives. So there are two choices: either you create black magic to turn people's head (for novelty) or you create some kind of basic sanity<sup>72</sup> (well-being for others). Those are the two possibilities, so you should be very, very careful."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> "Unborn" refers to where both positive and negative concepts that arises in our minds are the working of our Being-as such. Thus these concepts are not something apart from our Being and in this sense is "unborn" (Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, footnote 33, 150).

<sup>70</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, *The Tantric View of Life*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>72</sup> "Basic sanity" refers to the notion of being able to relate to and appreciate a situation clearly, by being able to work with our preconceptions and emotions. This awareness will help us to appreciate life better.

<sup>73</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Dharma Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 24.

As architects, we need to understand the root of concepts. We should realize that our imagination is like a double-edged sword. It has to be handled with care. If it is not handled carefully we might just hurt ourselves and others. The ethical implication of creative imagination is the attitude and ability of openness to see oneself as oneself and oneself as another. To be able to put ourselves in others' shoes, to work with concepts and their pre-conceptions, with play, interplay, juxtaposition, irony, humour and any skilful means, to bring out the value and dignity of a situation. With the ethical view in perspective, the means are up to the imagination and ability of the architect to explore. The ethical function of architecture is about the architect engaging critically and responsibly with the world using his creative imagination. This engagement, Kahn implied, has to do with sight, beauty and wonder.

## Wonder

8. This sight then came about, and sight immediately felt the total harmony — beauty — without reservation, without criticism, without choice. And art, which was immediately felt, was the first word. One can say the first line, but I think it was the first word. The first utterance could have been "Ah" — just that. What a powerful word that is; it expresses so much, you see, with just a few letters. Now from beauty came wonder. Wonder has nothing to do with knowledge. It's just a kind of first response to the intuitive being the odyssey or the record of the odyssey of our making through the billions, the untold billions, of years in making. I don't believe one thing started at one time, another thing at another time. Everything was started in one way at the same time. It was at no time, either; it just simply was there. Then came wonder. This is the same feeling that the astronauts must have felt when they saw the earth at a great distance. Of course I followed them, and I felt what they felt: this great ball in space, pink or rose and blue and white. Somehow all the thugs on it — even the great achievements like, let us say, Paris, a great achievement, or London — they all sort of disappeared and became circumstantial work. Yet, somehow the toccata and fugue did not

disappear, because they are the most unmeasurable and therefore the closest to that which cannot disappear.

Perhaps for Kahn, in seeing things for what they are, we realize beauty. This beauty is not a judgemental or preconceived "beautiful." It is a beauty that comes from "a total harmony, without reservation, without criticism, without choice." It is seeing things for what they are. The unadulterated beauty of seeing the world as it is, is to be without a self-conscious watcher observing our actions and making choices, and to just engage concretely and directly with our lived experience. From this very direct, honest, and ordinary experience we see beauty. Thus the utterance of "Ah – just that."

From beauty comes wonder. A wonder "that has nothing to do with (conceptual) knowledge, ... a kind of first response to intuitive being." Wonder is a direct response of Being, "the record of billions of years in making." Being, Kahn said, is "it just simply was there." Then came wonder.

Kahn then reminds us, there is a difference between on one hand, evoking wonder and awe from chasing after a goal like achieving greatness, and wonder, and on the other hand, the wonder from expressing the world as it is unselfconsciously. With great achievements, like going to the moon, or the building of Paris and London, they are still "circumstantial" or conventional, that will be surpassed by the next "great" thing, and thus they can disappear. The "toccata and fugue" for Kahn are the most unmeasurable and closest to that which cannot disappear, this is because great music comes from the depth of one's Being and it speaks of the value of our humanness.

The notion of wonder is important for architecture. This is because architecture can be "*thaumaturgic*," which means it could open the inhabitants or participants to "shock" that leads to wonder. This quality of wonder is the awe of seeing clearly the world for what it is without preconceptions and judgements, like the astronauts who saw the earth from a distance. For "the feeling of wonderment, (is) not so much as a passive state, but as an active, and in the strict sense of the word, a creative manner of looking at our familiar world, as if for the first time. In wonderment we can see with enormous clarity and exquisite sensitivity,"<sup>74</sup> that wonderment may raise our capacity for overcoming the monotony of ordinary restricted view." As for the quality of "shock," it is not to shock for novelty, but a "shock" to re-awakened the participants to the wonder of the primacy of their experiences.

Kahn seems to imply that wonder plays an important role in the ethical function of architecture that aims at revealing the value of life. However, to have a better idea of wonder as an "intuitive response," perhaps we could reflect on the nature of our intuition.

### **The importance of seeing and intuition**

9. The more deeply a thing is engaged in the unmeasurable, the more deeply lasting is its value. So the toccata and fugue you could not deny. You couldn't deny some of the great works of art, because they are really born out of the unmeasurable. And so I think that what you felt was, again, just wonder, not knowledge or knowing. You felt that knowledge was really not as important as your sense of wonder, which was a great feeling — without reservation, without obligation, without accounting for yourself, just the closest in-touchness with your intuitive wonder. From wonder must come realization, because in the record of your making you have gone

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<sup>74</sup> Longchenpa, *Kindly Bent to Ease Us, Part Three: Wonderment*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther (Berkeley, California: Dharma Publishing, 1976), ix-x.

through every law of nature. It is part of you. Recorded in your intuitive are all the great steps and momentous decisions of the making. Intuition is your most exacting sense. It is the most reliable sense. It is the most personal sense that a singularity has, and it, not knowledge, must be considered your greatest gift. If it isn't in wonder you needn't bother about it.

For Kahn, the "unmeasurable" are "such things as thought, feeling, realization."<sup>75</sup> They are the intangible qualities of us, which are our feelings and our intuitive experiences of the world. These intangible qualities resist being reduced or categorized, though we cannot see them, they can be felt and they are part of our Being. When Kahn said, "The more deeply a thing is engaged in the unmeasurable, the more deeply lasting is its value." He implies that the more a thing engages our intuitive responses, the more lasting is its value. On the other hand, in terms of making architecture, perhaps he means, the more honest, unselfconscious and direct our engagement with the world-as-is in our making, the more our work will be able to reveal the richness and dignity of a situation, and the more deeply lasting in value will be our work. The great works of art are the direct and primal expression of our Being. From them we feel wonder. The wonder that we felt from these works is not about knowledge. I believe that the "knowledge" that Kahn is referring to is "conceptual knowledge." Conceptual knowledge is not as important as wonder. For wonder is a feeling that comes without struggle because it is from letting be, seeing things as they are and unselfconscious making. From wonder must come realization which is intuitive. "Intuition," Kahn said, is our most "exact sense, not (conceptual) knowledge." This is because from wonder comes the "intuitive and primordial feeling" of our Being.

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<sup>75</sup> Louis I. Kahn, "On Form and Design," *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Interviews, Lectures*, 103.



However, we must be careful. We need to know what intuition is about. The usual "intuition" we know is when our actions are based on our feelings, seemingly without particular reasons. We do not realize that "feeling intuitively" about something actually comes from our past experiences, which are made up of real experiences, preconceived notions and our interpretations of things. It is not really without reasons, rather how we feel is based on the concepts of our past experiences. At times, we even use intuition as an excuse not to think critically and examine a problem from its beginning. On the other hand, we can be intuitive in the sense of being really free of the influence of concepts, where we see things clearly and could act confidently in responding to any new challenges, then this is the intuition of the most "exact sense."

Intuition is also the most personal for a singularity. By "singularity," Kahn believes that every one of us is individually unique and talented, with qualities to share with the world. By using "singularity" rather than "individuality," perhaps he is trying to express that we are one of One, of Being and our humanity, which is the commonality we all share. At the same time, perhaps he is also expressing the interdependence of each of us, which has the notion of "one of One," rather than an individualistic I and the Other.

Perhaps Kahn is saying that we cannot escape from interpreting our world. The need to interpret is to be seen as a strength and not a weakness. Though intuition is the most personal, it is also unique. Our intuition perhaps is the greatest gift. By sharing with others our different perspectives we contribute to the richness and multi-dimensionality of the world. The only criterion for our making is that the interpretation be steeped in wonder,

which is the quality of our honest, clear and alive minds. However, to work in wonder, we must be able to see clearly.

Why is "seeing" so important? In seeing things as they are, we could respond more effectively to our human condition. Confused views will obviously lead to confused actions. We tend to see what we want to see and thus we miss the point most of the time. The usual occurrence is that we have our "pet" theories, which essentially are partial views and reductions of a phenomenon. However, we often act to reinforce our egos and concepts, and tend to forget that what we do is for the common well-being of humanity. The ethical function of architecture requires that we "see things as they are."

Kahn urged that "we should be less selective and more probing."<sup>76</sup> He warns us of projecting our conceptions onto the world rather than seeing it for what it is. The architect should probe more rigorously and strive to avoid confused views, to be more critical of fashions and opinions, and to consider the design of architectural programs to meet the needs of our changing world.

Why do we need to "see"? The ethical function of architecture is a common happiness, but with confused view it leads to confused action, which leads to unhappiness. To "see things as they are" is to get to the root of our unhappiness.

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<sup>76</sup> Louis I. Kahn, "The Value and Aim in Sketching," *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Interviews, Lectures*, 10.

## Knowledge and knowing - cutting through confusion

10. This must be considered when knowledge, which is a tremendously valuable thing, comes to you. It is valuable because from knowledge, you get to knowing, which is private. The only thing valuable to you is knowing, and knowing must never be imparted because it is very singular, very impure; it has to do with you. But knowing can give you in-touchness with your intuitive (*sic*), and therefore the life of knowing is very real, but personal. Just think how much the schools must learn before they can honor the mind of the person. Within lodges the spirit: in the brain, it doesn't lodge. The brain is simply a mechanism. So the mind is different from the brain. The mind is the seat of the intuitive and the brain is an instrument; you get them pot luck from nature. That's why each one is a singularity.

Kahn cautions, though knowledge is not as important as wonder, it is still necessary, because "from knowledge you get to knowing, which is private." From knowledge of the nature of things and seeing them as they are, we come to know ourselves. This knowing of ourselves gives us the "in-touchness" with our own unique intuitive way of Being. From knowing ourselves, we discover our strengths, weaknesses, preconceptions and talents, for us to work with and grow. Out of this growth and understanding, we share our uniqueness with the world through our actions.

In the Buddhist context, there are two kinds of knowledge, *prajna* and *jnana*. *Jnana* is wisdom, the knowledge of "spontaneously-existing-awareness-wisdom." *Jnana* is the knowledge of being spontaneously existing, the facticity of Being, you know what you are, therefore you can trust yourself all the time.<sup>77</sup> This is one form of knowing. With *Prajna*, it is the knowledge that cuts through confusion. It is a critical and intelligent knowing that cuts through the confusion of this and that preconceptions. The *prajna* of know-

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<sup>77</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 109.

ing, when dealing with emotions, cuts through conflicting emotions to reveal who we really are. The *prajna* of seeing comes from seeing things for what they are. *Prajna* is the critical faculty of cutting through all forms of concepts holding us back, it is the critical faculty of knowing exactly who we are and the sharp and penetrating ability to reveal a situation.<sup>78</sup> It is the knowledge and the knowing to deal with any new challenge because we know precisely our own naked self.

Kahn suggests that the uniqueness of all of us lies in one's mind and not in one's brain. It is time our schools learn to harness the unique talent in each one of us, rather than force us to do things that are not part of us, which we cannot excel in. It is also time for us to be honest with ourselves to recognize what we are good at, and not waste time trying to do what we have no talent for. The ethical function of architecture is about performing to our fullest potential, to be happy doing what we do best. All this comes from knowing ourselves. However to know, we need to burn through our confusion.

In the Buddhist context, unhappiness comes from the confusion with the phenomena around us, that forms our understanding, which will lead to confused action, disappointment and frustration. According to Chogyam Trungpa, happiness comes from "cutting through our confusion, of uncovering the awakened state of our mind. When the awakened state of the mind is crowded by ego and its attendant paranoia, (the awakened state of mind) takes on the character of an underlying instinct. So it is not a matter of building up the awakened state of mind, but rather of burning out the

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<sup>78</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 209.

confusion which obstructs it.”<sup>79</sup> He adds, “The heart of the confusion is that man has a sense of self which seems to be continuous and solid.”<sup>80</sup> This is because the root of all human activity is the thirst for certainty. “When a thought or emotion occurs, there seems to be a sense of someone being conscious of what is happening. You sense you are reading these words. This sense of self is actually a transitory, discontinuous event, which in our confusion seem to be quite solid and continuous. Since we take our confused view as being real, we struggle to maintain and enhance this solid self.”<sup>81</sup> In short, we feed our ego to maintain our own legitimacy.

To avoid confusion, it is important to note that the term “ego” or “self” in the Buddhist context means “the conceptual certainty that one exists as an isolated, permanent and self-sufficient self.” This is caused by the false certainty and security from the reduction of the actual phenomena, created by the process of understanding which relies on our conceptualizing and categorizing mind. In contrast, the notion of “no-ego” or “no-self” simply means “it (the ego or self) cannot exist truly, for it is interdependent.”<sup>82</sup> The point stressed is that we are all interdependent and are constantly changing, to realize the futility of reductive experience, so that we could appreciate the richness of lived experience.

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<sup>79</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Tsongkapa, *The Principal Teachings of Buddhism*, trans. Geshe Lobsang Tharchin and Michael Roach (New Jersey: Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press, 1988), 131.

Chone Lama (who is Chone Geshe Lobsang Gyatso, the teacher of Pabongka Rinpoche the commentator of this Tsongkapa text) explains this statement: “the literal sense of this statement’s first part, ‘It cannot exist truly,’ serves to prevent the extreme of thinking things are permanent. The implication of saying that something cannot exist ‘truly,’ is to say that, more generally, it is not non-existent; this then disallows the extreme of thinking that things have stopped. And this description ... was enough for us to figure the second part, ... because it is interdependent.” (*The Principal Teachings of Buddhism*, 132).

Experiences, however, threaten to reveal our transitoriness to us, but to maintain this certainty of solid self, we deceive ourselves and struggle to cover up any possibility of discovering our real condition. "If we already have an awakened state, which in Buddhist terms is Buddha-nature or Being-as-Such, why do we avoid being aware of it?" This is because we are too absorbed in our conceptual world which we consider the only possible real world. Thus to work towards the well-being of others, we need to know the nature of our ego.

### **The nature of ego - brain, mind and our faculties**

11. The instrument can bring to the fore that which, if it is a good instrument, would bring the spirit within you out and put it in touch: the brain makes the mind the mind. The singularity, however, is the mind, not the brain. So, with the sense of wonder comes realization — realization, somehow born out of the intuitive, that something must be so. It has definite existence though you can't see it. Nobody can see your mind, but in it lies existence. You can strive because existence makes you think of what you want to express because the expression is a drive: to express is to drive. You then make the distinction between existence and presence, and when you want to give something presence you have to consult nature.

For Kahn, our brain is only an instrument to hold our mind. That our realization comes from the wonder of seeing our nature as it is, which is direct and intuitive. For Buddhism, the mind is considered the sixth faculty, besides our five senses. Though we cannot see our mind, it is what makes things exist as concepts and interpretations. The mind is what shapes the way we see the world. It is our mind that determines how we express architecture. If we want to know "what gives presence to (architecture)," we have to consult our Being, to know the nature of our mind, or what Buddhism calls our "ego."

How did our ego come about?

By reflecting on what Buddhism say about the primacy of our perception, wonder and the “de-familiarization” of the world around us, perhaps we as architects could learn how we could “creatively perceive” in order to design to reveal the richness of our environment.

For Buddhism, fundamentally, our mind is just the basic ground, an open space. Our most basic state of mind, before the creation of ego, is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality, which we have always had. According to Buddhism, “when we see an object, in the first (pre-reflective) instant there is a sudden perception which has no logic or conceptualization to it at all; we just perceive the thing in an open ground.”<sup>83</sup> One might argue that this is not the case. In fact our usual experience is that we recognize an object straight away. For example we know a pen when we see one. However, this is precisely the argument, because we are already familiar with the objects such as the pen, that we often neglect to stop and appreciate each pen’s uniqueness in design. Thus the process of “de-familiarization” would aid the architects in appreciating and revealing the multi-dimensionality, richness and thickness of meaning in our otherwise familiar and “dull” environment.

Familiarization and categorization of our experiences take place when “immediately we panic and begin to rush about trying to add something to the object, either trying to find a name for it or trying to find pigeon-holes in which we could locate and categorize this object. Gradually things develop

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<sup>83</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 122.

from there.”<sup>84</sup> When we name a thing, we gradually believe it is a solid and permanent entity and that the name is the object. This is what the Buddhist would call a mistaken view or an illusion. The confused mind mistakes a collection of conditions and events for a certain, absolute and isolated entity. For Buddhism, the collection that makes up a human being is known as the Five *Skandhas* or Five Aggregates.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 122.

<sup>85</sup> The five *skandhas* or aggregates are a collection of tendencies that forms our psycho-physical make-up. They are Matter or Form, Sensation or Feeling, Perception, Mental Formation and Consciousness.

The *skandha* of Form includes the Four Great Elements of the Indian tradition, namely solidity, fluidity, heat and motion, and their derivatives. The derivatives of these Four Great Elements include our six sense-organs (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) and their corresponding objects in the external world, (such as) visible form, sound, odour, taste, tangible things and thoughts, ideas and concepts which are in the sphere of the mind-objects. The whole realm of Matter or Form, both internal and external are included in this aggregate (Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 21).

The *skandha* of Sensation or Feeling includes all our sensations, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, (that are) experienced through the contact of the physical and mental organs with the external world (21). This includes the sensations experienced through the six sense-organs. All physical and mental sensations are included. For Buddhist philosophy, the ‘mind’ is neither spirit nor matter. It does not recognize a spirit as opposed to matter, as accepted by other systems of philosophy and religion. The mind is the sixth sense-organ. With our five senses we experience the world of forms, sounds, odours, tastes and tangibles, but they represent only part of the world. We have thoughts and ideas that cannot be conceived by these organs except by the mind. Ideas and thoughts are not conceived independently from the world, they are in fact produced and conditioned by physical experiences, and are conceived by the mind.

The *skandha* of Perception, like that of “Sensation” are (also) of six kinds. They are in relation to our six internal faculties and their corresponding external objects which are produced through contact with the external world. It is perception that recognizes objects whether physical or mental (22).

The fourth is the *skandha* of Mental Formation. In the context of the Five Aggregates, Mental Formation is called *Samsara*. In other contexts, it means anything conditioned, anything in the world, in which sense all the Five Aggregates are *Samsara* (22 & footnotes). All volitional activities both good and bad come under Mental Formation. According to Buddha, “It is volition that I call Karma. Having willed, one acts through body, speech and mind. Volition is ‘mental construction, mental activity. Its function is to direct the mind in the sphere of good, bad or neutral activities” (22). Volition is of six kinds, like sensations and perceptions, in relation to the six internal faculties and their corresponding objects. Sensations and perceptions are not volitional action. Volitional actions are those such as desire, will, concentration (*samadhi*), wisdom (*prajna*), ignorance, idea of self, to name a few. Buddhism have identified 52 such mental activities which constitute Mental Formation. It is important to note that they arise in respond to conditions, thus wisdom thinks itself, and is not directed by an absolute being.

The fifth *skandha* is Consciousness. Consciousness is a respond to one of the six faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) as the basis, and one of the corresponding external phenomena



Chogyam Trungpa explains: "The beginning point of (our mind) is that there is open space, belonging to no one. There is always a primordial intelligence connected with the space and its openness. This is *Vidya* which means "intelligence" in Sanskrit – precision, sharpness, sharpness with space, sharpness with room in which to put things, exchange things. It is like a spacious hall where there is room to dance, where there is no danger of knocking things over or tripping over things, for there is completely open space. We are this space. We are one with it, with *vidya*, intelligence and openness."<sup>86</sup> This open space is about a primordial and pre-reflective experience with no duality of I and Other. The "dance" is the dance of our mind free from the limits of this and that. We are one with the space which has a flowing luminous quality and there is a lot of room for us to dance in.

How did the confusion come about? We become more self-conscious in our dancing, we become conscious that we are dancing in the space. This self-consciousness makes the space no longer space, but solid space. We are longer one with the space, the solid space we feel is seen as a separate entity. This is the start of duality – space and I. This is the birth of "form," or the "other."<sup>87</sup> Then we forget the space as openness. In our thirst for certainty, we always need points of reference, we accept the solid space, we need the "other" to

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(visible form, sound, odour, taste, tangible things, and mind objects such as idea or thought) as its object. For Mental Consciousness, the mind is the basis with ideas and thoughts as its objects. Like sensation, perception and volition, consciousness is also of six kinds that relate to the six internal faculties and correspond to the six external objects (23). Consciousness, for Buddhist thought, is a faculty that does not recognize an object. It is only an awareness of the object's presence. There is no recognition. It is perception (the third *skandha*) that recognizes an object. Thus "visual consciousness" is an expression that expresses the same notion as what the ordinary word "seeing" conveys. Seeing does not mean recognizing (23). This is the same for all the other consciousness.

<sup>86</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 123.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

confirm the "I." We ignore the space as openness. In Buddhist terms, this is called *avidya* or "ignorance." The solid space becomes static. We ignore our pre-reflective experience. Ignorance here does not mean stupidity. It means that we are reacting to our mind-projections and not seeing what is. There is no situation of "letting be," because we are ignoring what we are all the time.

According to Buddhism, ignorance comes about when the five *skandhas* are not recognized for being conditioned-originated. They are responsible for confusing us that there is a permanent, isolated and absolute "I." This confusion prevents us from seeing that the ego is an intellectual conceptualization that only satisfies our craving for certainty. However, seen clearly, all phenomena are a complex combination of conditions, that we are never separate from the world as is. This implies that the consequences of our actions are inter-related, and that actions will have an effect on the world. Therefore our actions matter, and hence the importance of ethical concerns. It is important to note that these five *skandhas* are not an atomistic reductive model of the living being. In fact, the five *skandhas* themselves are "empty" of any inherent existence. Everything arises out of conditions, there is nothing unchanging and permanently present. Therefore, we need to know how things are interdependent and the consequences of our actions.

### **Realizing conditioned-origination**

12. This is where design comes in. The realization is realization in form, which means nature. You realize that something has a certain nature. When you think of the making of a school, the school has a certain nature. In making it you must consult the laws of nature, and the consultation and approval of nature are absolutely necessary. There you will find, discover, the order of water, the order of wind, the order of light, the order of certain materials. If you think

of brick, for instance, and you consult the orders, you consider the nature of brick. This is a natural thing. You say to the brick, "What do you want, brick?" And brick says to you, "I like an arch." And you say to brick, "Look, I want one too, but arches are expensive and I can use a concrete lintel over you, over an opening." And then you say, "What do you think of that, brick?" Brick says, "I like an arch."

From knowing about the nature of our ego, this is where design comes in. For Kahn, design comes from the realization of the form, which is the nature of something. In making, one must know the nature of the thing one intends to make. One might misunderstand that Kahn is saying that a thing has an inherent and permanent nature which is absolute. That the nature of a school, for example, is always the same regardless of its changing context. Kahn might be seen as falling into the trap of reductive thinking and categorization, contradicting what he said earlier.

However, this is not the case. For Kahn said, "Form, in my opinion, has no shape or dimension; form is merely a realization of the difference between one thing and another, that which has its own characteristic."<sup>88</sup> When Kahn asks the brick, "What do you want, brick?" There are two ways of interpreting his question. One way to interpret is for him to find the "essence – the unchanging and absolute quality of how a brick has to be used," and to follow exactly. The other is to "see the brick for what it is, recognize its potential and character, and open oneself to the many possibilities for using the brick." Surmising from Kahn's fragmented thoughts, I believe he is talking about the latter.

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<sup>88</sup> Louis I. Kahn, "A Statement," *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, 148.

For Buddhism, it is believed that there is no such thing as a permanent unchanging Nature or Self for things as well as ourselves. The five aggregates of our psycho-physical make-up are interdependently combined in a being. There is no permanent unchanging spirit, as opposed to matter, such as Self, Ego or Soul. Consciousness is not to be taken as spirit. There had always been a wrong conception that consciousness is a permanent Self or Soul from the earliest time to the present. For Buddhist thought, consciousness, mental formation and the mind are as much a faculty as the eye or ear.<sup>89</sup>

Sati, one of Buddha's disciples said Buddha taught that there is a "consciousness that transmigrates and wanders." When Buddha heard, he asked Sati what he meant by consciousness. Sati's reply was classical, "It is that which expresses, which feels, which experiences the results of good and bad deeds here and there." To this Buddha replied, "To whomever, you stupid one, have you heard me expounding the doctrine in this manner? Haven't I in many ways explained consciousness as arising out of conditions: that there is no arising of consciousness without conditions."<sup>90</sup>

What we call "I," "being" or an "individual" is a convenient name for a combination of the five aggregates, which are all impermanent and constantly changing. A person or a thing arises from the coming together of conditions, which is similar to Heidegger's notion of "a thing is a gathering." The notion of conditioned-arising is such that everything arises out of conditions, nothing arises out of no conditions or in isolation. This is when one thing disappears, conditioning the appearance of the next, in a series of

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<sup>89</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 22.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

cause and effect. There is no unchanging substance in them nor a permanent Self.

None of the five aggregates could be called a Self, but when all these five mental and physical aggregates interdependently work together, it gives an idea of the Self. This is a false idea constructed by our mental formations.<sup>91</sup> The world is impermanent, they are constantly in a flux. This is similar to the famous saying of Heraclitus, "You cannot step into the same river twice, for fresh water is ever flowing in upon you." It is essential to note that this flux is such that no two moments are the same. Every moment has a birth, decay and death. It is implied too that everything which is conditioned-dependent is thus interdependent.

The importance of this is that architecture is interdependent on all conditions affecting the architect. For architecture, this includes the building, the experience of the space, our cultures, the site, the state of the mind, and many other factors. In turn, when architecture is built it will create other conditions. The notion of interdependence is about the situatedness of both architect and architecture. Architecture does not exist in isolation and thus all actions of the architect have political and ethical implications.

The ethical function in the design of architecture comes from meeting the challenges of the changing world for our well-being. This requires us to have an alive mind, to be open to new architectural programs and new ways of construction, in order to meet our present needs. All this requires that we recognize the fallacy of believing in the permanence of our preconceived

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<sup>91</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 26.

ideas, our laziness to change, and the imposition of our ego. At the same time, we need to realize that working for the well-being of others comes from understanding the notion of oneself as another. This starts with realizing no-self.

### **No-self or death of the author**

13. It's important, you see, that you honor the material that you use. You don't bandy it around as though to say, "Well, we have a lot of material around. We can do it one way. We can do it another way." It's not true. You can only do it if you honor the brick and glorify the brick instead of shortchanging it or giving it an inferior job to do, where it loses its character. When you use it as infill material, for instance — which I have done, you have done — the brick feels like a servant. Brick is a beautiful material and it has done beautiful work in many places; it still does because it's a completely live material. In three-quarters of the world the brick is the only logical material to use because concrete is highly sophisticated material and not as readily available as you think. And so you can talk to nature about many other things.

What is important to Kahn in design is to "honor the material you use." Honour comes from respecting the material for what it is, not something you want it to be. The quality of our architecture comes from the love, care, honour, respect and dignity in using the materials we build with. If materials are not correctly used for what they are, the building and its quality will fail, and this is the fault of the architect. This fault comes from the imposition of the architect's preconceptions, forcing the materials to be what they are not. Perhaps if we examine the Buddhist notion of no-self, the architect could learn how to work with one's preconceptions.

To reflect on this notion of no-self, the common question would be, "If there is no-self, who thinks, who wakes up in the morning, who eats?"

However, it is not that with no-self, one disappears. One does not disappear. This is because the notion of no-self refers to conditioned-arising, where everything that arises, arises out of conditions. No-self refers to the fact that we are interdependent and conditioned-originated, thus there is no absolute self as the unchanging mover. If we reflect further, we will see that thought itself is conditioned-dependent, thus thought arises, thought thinks, in respond to conditions, there is no thinker behind, just the thinking Being. In our misunderstanding of thought and consciousness we believe in a false sense of self.

This is totally the opposite of Descartes' famous dictum, "*Cogito ergo sum*." Cartesian thought is a "closed" system, because it privileges the concepts of our mind with the notion "because I think and of what I think, I exist." It implies the imposition of our preconceived notions on the world-as-is. At the same time, it is also about the reduction of our experiences, which thus provide us with a poor understanding and partial view of the world. The notion of no-self, seen otherwise, might be, "I am, therefore I think." This awareness of our thoughts and projections would persuade us not to jump to conclusions too fast. In our openness, we see and act as we are, in the primacy of our experience, without the conceptual holding us back.

This notion of no-self might help illuminate such notions as "death of the author" found in contemporary philosophy as well as deconstruction's "no-position." Both the notions of "death of the author" and deconstruction's "no-position" recognize the fact that interpretations are relative. Thus both notions caution us against relying too much on the extreme of any one view. However, if one is not careful, these notions might lead to a nihilistic stance

such as “life is an illusion, nothing exists, our actions do not matter therefore anything goes.” Though the notion of no-self also recognizes the relativity of our interpretations and views, it does not become nihilistic because it also recognizes that our actions and views are interdependent. The notion of no-self recognizes a “groundless” ground for our actions. Thus for the notion of no-self, “life cannot exist truly because life is interdependent, which means we cannot exist alone and isolated but we are dependent on each other, therefore our actions do matter.”

This notion of no-self, in the Buddhist context, is from the notion of *sunyata*, literally translated as emptiness. This notion of *sunyata* could aid to further illuminate the ethical consequences of “interdependence” and the “facticity of Being” that was mentioned earlier, which was regarded by Kahn, as the “most precious” that we “can really offer.” The understanding of these notions will aid the architect towards ethical action.

In the *Prajnaparamita-hridaya*, which is also called the Heart Sutra, *Avalokitesvara*<sup>92</sup> taught: “Listen Shariputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.”<sup>93</sup>

In terms of interdependence and its ethical implication, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master explained the phrase “form is

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<sup>92</sup> *Avalokitesvara* is a Bodhisattva (an awakened being) whose mission is to work towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

<sup>93</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*. ed. Peter Levitt (Berkeley California: Parallax Press, 1988), 1.



emptiness, emptiness is form" to mean "to be empty is to be empty of something."<sup>94</sup> Emptiness means we are empty of a separate self. It is full of everything, full of life ... To be empty, does not mean non-existent."<sup>95</sup>

As Thich Nhat Hanh wrote beautifully: "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the paper cannot be either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. 'Interbeing' is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix 'inter-' with the verb 'to be,' we have a new verb 'inter-be." Without a cloud, we cannot have paper, so we can say that the cloud and the sheet of paper *inter-are*.<sup>96</sup> Thus "if the sheet of paper is not empty, how could the sunshine, logger, the forest come into it? Emptiness is the (groundless, because it is a dynamic) ground of everything. If I am not empty, I cannot be here. Because you are here I am here."<sup>97</sup> And he reminds us, "Emptiness is about impermanence, it is change. We should not complain about impermanence, because without impermanence nothing is possible."<sup>98</sup>

In terms of facticity of Being, and the ethical implications of direct action and seeing things as they are, Chogyam Trungpa explained that when we say "form is empty, (we could ask) but empty of what? Form is empty of our preconceptions, empty of our judgements."<sup>99</sup> "Form" refers to the original

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<sup>94</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*. 9.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>99</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, 188.

richness and thickness of meaning, that is before reductive thought, in a situation or an experience. By saying that "emptiness is also form," it means that even when we try to see "form as empty," to see things without preconceptions, is also a concept. We have to be very careful of this subtle point of "non-grasping" of concepts. By "non-grasping," I mean that we do not hold on to the concepts that arises in our minds, but just "let it be." The fact is that we have to embody this understanding and not intellectualize. "We have to *feel* things as they are,"<sup>100</sup> their thingness, the is-ness of things. This is the principle of non-grasping which also includes not holding on to "non-grasping" as a concept.

Once we realize that we are interdependent on conditions and each other, we realize the partial truths of our views which only show us what we want to see. We realize that this emptiness is the openness of our minds. We should "bracket" our preconception and see things for what they are. That we could appreciate the thickness, depth, richness and inter-relatedness of our experience, to see the world as a place worth living in and working for, and not be indifferent to it. With interdependence and "non-grasping," we would learn how to make architecture for the well-being of ourselves and others in an embodied way, with the primacy of our experience.

Kahn reminds us that to know how to make architecture for the changing world is to see the world for what it is and its possibilities. This comes from constant reflection and knowing ourselves, for us to know how to respond. After all, "you can talk to nature (Being) about many other things."

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<sup>100</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, 188.

## Teaching

14. When I talk to students, the one feeling I always have is that everyone can surpass me in my work. They don't, but that's my attitude, I feel that being in school is like being in a chapel, and my duty is to write psalms. I come much more refreshed and challenged from the classes. I learn more from the students than I probably teach. This is not an idle thing; it is only learning, but I learn it in my own way. It isn't what they teach me, but what I teach myself in the presence of those who I think are singularities. Therefore, teaching is the art of singularity to singularity. It is not talking to a group; a group is just a matter of so many and so many singularities. They teach you your own singularity because only a singularity can teach a singularity.

Kahn tells us that teaching is about developing the potential of his students. It is to help open their minds to make them aware about living rather than just how to build a building. The development of an attitude towards life and architecture is dynamic and will stay with them forever. This is much more than the latest technique in construction or the latest architectural theory.

Teaching is also about learning. For Kahn, "it isn't what they teach me, but what I teach myself in the presence of those who I think are singularities." By "singularity," Kahn is referring to our individual uniqueness that we have to develop to be really ourselves. It is only when we recognize what we are, then perhaps our unique architecture will appear. Some already realize it, but some have not. Thus "teaching is the art of singularity to singularity." It is the art of sharing one's perspective of the world with another. Teaching is about the development of our individual growth, unlike many architecture schools in which teaching is just the dissemination of knowledge and the "mass-production" of technically competent architects.

We have to recognize that everyone is unique. It is in the sharing and exchange of our uniqueness that will reveal the different perspectives and richness of the world, to make the world worth living in.

### **The ethical function of architecture is joy**

15. Design from form is a realization of the nature of something which is in here. It's completely inaudible, unseeable, and you turn to nature to make it actually present from existence in the mind. I turn to what I said before about a room. And I would not like to feel that I have forgotten, nor you as I speak to you, about the stream of joy which is felt. Otherwise you don't really feel anything. If what I say somehow activates it I'd be, of course, terribly pleased and honored. But back to the room as the beginning of architecture.

Design is from the direct expression of our Being. It comes from knowing our minds which are intangible but definitely here. Kahn reminds us about the joy he felt in the room with the music, and he wonders if we could feel the joy from what he said about "the ethical function of architecture." If we feel joy from what he had said, then we have understood, and he would be "terribly pleased and honored."

With understanding the notions of the ethical function of architecture and knowing ourselves, the parts "View" and "Meditation" are in place. With Kahn, we shall now explore the part of "Action" – the ethical practice of architecture, which starts with the "room as the beginning of architecture."

## **ACTION**

### **The room is an event**

16. If you think about it, you realize that you don't say the same thing in a small room as you do in a large room. If I were to speak in the Sheraton Hotel I would have to pick one person who smiles at me in order to be able to speak at all, especially extemporaneously, without notes in front of me. It's an event and you treat it as an event, and therefore the room is different. Three people can make you say your lines that you've always said before because already you're somehow performing and not just thinking in terms of them.

To design, we have to begin with seeing architecture for what it is. To be aware of our preconceptions of what architecture should be. It is not about formal manipulations or making pretty buildings, nor is it about showing off gravity-defying stunts. Architecture has nothing to do with fantasy or egotistical statements. To see architecture as it is, as Kahn puts it, "If you think about it," architecture starts with the room. Kahn considered the room the beginning of architecture.

To see the room for what it is, we realize that the situation in a small room is different from a big room. The situation becomes different again with the activity and the people in it. It sounds obvious, but sometimes we forget, do not bother or just take it for granted. The room is an event. Kahn reminds us that a room is alive, it is an embodied experience. The room is both psychological and physical.

Each room is unique. It should be designed for an event with its own narrative. The room cannot be reduced to a type or a formula. This is perhaps the difference between, what I would call, the notions of "space as type" and

“space as event.” In terms of the notion of “space as type,” the space is reduced to categories, formulae and standards. We would design by planning with the “types” of a bedroom, a kitchen, or a dining room. On the other hand, for the notion of “space as event,” we would look at the “essence” of the experience of the activity in a space. We would design with the notions of a space for sleeping, a space for cooking, or a space for eating. The difference between the notions of “space as type” and “space as event” is that “space as type” is a static, reductive and preconceived notion of a “standard” space, disregarding any changes in the nature of the activity and our experiences of it. While the notion of “space as event” is open to understanding the root of the experience of the activity. The problem with the former is where the “historicity” of a situation is sedimented in “types,” which remains stagnant. While the latter allows us to design for the changing needs of our activities and experiences. In other words, the room is an expression of our Being. It is designed from our direct and embodied experiences and an understanding of the event in the room.

### **Questioning the architectural brief**

17. Also, what’s marvellous about a room is that the light that comes through the windows 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 a room, is nothing short of the making of a miracle. To think that a man can claim a slice of the sun. Now when you get an order from the school board which says: “We have a great idea! We should not put windows in school because, after all, the darlings, you see, in the class need wall space for their paintings. And after all, also, a window could distract the teacher.” But what teacher deserves that much attention? I’d like to know. After all, the bird outside, the person scurrying for shelter, the rain and you inside, the leaves falling from the tree, the clouds passing by, the sun penetrating, are all great things. They’re lessons in themselves. The windows are essential to the school. You were made from light and therefore you must live with the sense that light is important. It

isn't just a direction from a school board, an educator, so to speak, telling you what life is all about. This must be resisted. Without light there is no architecture.

With the attitude of "seeing the room for what it is," the architect should not just accept any architectural brief. The architect has to question the brief with the awareness that the ethical function of architecture is about revealing the multi-dimensionality, richness of meaning and value of our world. The architect has to remember that one is designing for the primacy of our experiences as living beings, and not abstract beings in a conceptual program. Architecture is embodied experience and is never conceptual. The room, for Kahn, is nothing sort of a miracle, because it can reveal to us a slice of the sun which we would have taken for granted, the event would perhaps "shock" us to wonder at the reality and the impermanence of our lives, and to beckon us to appreciate the riches of our "still unfamiliar" familiar world.

Kahn uses the example of a school-board who wanted classrooms without windows. Kahn thinks this is stupid because we need windows for the natural light to come in and for us to see the world outside. This is not just because he has his own preconceptions of what a classroom should be, or because of any romantic notion he has of nature, but because he sees very clearly what learning is about. He is designing a room for learning rather than just a classroom to be in. The room for learning is about learning that extends beyond the four walls. The windows allow for this and the sunlight reminds us of our rootedness in the world and the richness it would share. For learning has no boundaries, it is as much about knowledge and facts, and the world around us and life. The architect is reminded not to blindly and lazily follow the brief set by the client, but to question it because we have an ethical responsibility.

## **Working with reality - the room is the medium**

18. Then the room is a terribly important thing. And if you realize also that a plan is a society of rooms, then the large room and the small room become a kind of great thing that you employ. That tall room, the low room, the one with the fireplace, and the one without, becomes a great event in your mind and you begin to think, not of the requirements but of the nature of the architectural elements that you can employ to make the environment a place where it is good to learn or good to live or good to work. Then you are really in the midst of architecture and not in the operational atmosphere of the professional man.

After questioning and seeing the brief for what it is, we can now work with the room as our medium. Working with reality, we realize that architecture is the interdependent coming together of many rooms. With conditioned-origination, where everything arises out of conditions and not isolated by itself, we see the psycho-physical effects that different rooms of different dimensions have, and not what we preconceived it to be. This might seem obvious, but often the architect allow "artistic fantasy" to take over, for chaos and our ego to reign. In terms of design and artistic spontaneity, the architect have to realize that there is a difference between creating "orderly chaos" and "unawakened chaos." With "orderly chaos," our artistic spontaneity is given intelligence and discipline when we see the world for what it is, engaging with it accordingly with a clear understanding, to create environments to illuminate. While for "unawakened chaos," our fantasies take over because we want to escape and not want to deal with the reality of our world, thus the expression comes out novel, confusing and chaotic.

The architect is not just a professional performing a service, but has an ethical responsibility to design for the well-being of everyone. We are encouraged to go beyond just meeting the requirements of a program and to



design for the activity, for the intangible well-being of the users. This comes from seeing the root of the activity and designing creatively. The ethical function of architecture is to employ these rooms, creatively and imaginatively, in making an environment “where it is good to learn, or good to live or work.”

### **The architectural profession**

19. You're highly protected as a professional man. There isn't a person who can even say he's not as good a professional as the other fellow. You can't. Especially if you join A.I.A. Everybody's completely equal. That is not so: they're not equal. They're marvellous, yes, but not equal. And not everybody is equally talented. There's no question that talent prevails anywhere. There's no person without talent. That's ridiculous. They all have talent. It's only a question, you see, of which way your singularity can blossom, because you cannot learn anything that's not part of yourself. It's impossible.

By seeing what the nature of our profession is, we must recognize that architecture is not just a job. It is employing ourselves to the best of our talents. Kahn makes a distinction between the professional architect and the ethical architect. Everyone can become a professional architect, because it is about how competent one is. Everyone can be competent, but architecture, for Kahn, is more than being competent. It is about developing our unique talents. Kahn believes that everyone is talented, but not equally. To do our best is being what we are. The ethical function of architecture starts with knowing ourselves and developing what is part of us.

## **Expressing Being - seeing our naked self**

20. You've learned physics, I'm sure, many of you, and you don't know a word of it, yet you passed the examination. That happened to me. I copied the notes of the guy next to me, who could listen and write. If I listened, I couldn't write: if I wrote, I didn't listen. And so I had to copy his notes because he could do both things. He knew what the professor was talking about before he said it, and I had to listen to every word. Now if the teacher had said to me, "Louie Kahn, it's important for you to learn physics because you're going to be an architect," I knew that a long time, so he was right. But he says, "I know what you are. You'll be examined but I'll ask you to *draw* physics for me. That's all. Don't just write what I said." And I would surprise him. It would be my forte, my way, and therefore must not be disturbed. You lose the sense of your worth by putting yourself in — crowding yourself in — with that which doesn't belong to you at all. You'll just forget it. It will never be with you. I don't know any more than one or two principles of physics.

The ethical practice of architecture comes from excellence. The excellent making of architecture comes from realizing what we are good at, to care about the quality of our work and the consequences of what we have created. This requires a very honest and down to earth look at our naked self to admit that part of us. We have to work past our egos and see ourselves for what we are, and how we are interdependent with others. Perhaps after this, we will be able to make architecture to the best of our abilities because we care about how the quality of our work will contribute to the common happiness of everyone.

## **Creative imagining - inventing new programs**

21. The plan is a society of rooms. When you realize that you don't say the same thing in a small room that you do in a large room you realize that a school should be a kind of environment of rooms which would be ready for, would be offerings to school. And in doing this you become inventive in the way that is applicable to school. You would eliminate every

corridor, I'm sure, and turn the corridors into halls. The halls would be the pupils' spaces that belong to them as the classroom of the students. There, the little boy can speak to the other little boys and say, "What did the teacher say?" The other boy listens and records. When the boy gets the lessons from a person of the same age, somehow the lesson becomes understandable.

Architecture is more than just building, it is about being creative. To be creative is to be alive. Creativity is a making to give meaning to our lives. Therefore architecture, whose plan is a society of rooms, is about making narratives for our experiences. These narratives come from the invention of new architectural programs and the questioning of old ones. The new programs are uncertain truths to meet the contemporary challenges that life gives, rather than to live in old and certain untruths that are no longer relevant. Perhaps the meaning and value of life come from being able to meet these challenges, to give us a purpose and reason to live. Not grasping on to "certain untruths," we design with an honest down-to-earth critical look at the ever-changing world. The invention of new programs comes not from what you think is good, but from what you see to be appropriate and creative.

### **Where does the architect sit?**

22. How many things must happen and where does the architect sit? He sits right there. He is the man who conveys the beauty of space, which is the very meaning of space, of meaningful spaces. They're all meaningful. You invent an environment, and it can be your own invention. It doesn't have to be a prototype. It simply has to be the way you see the environment for learning, and not taken from all the directions that may be gotten from your books of standards. Therein lies the architect. He is not defined by being able, let's say, to gather sufficient information to operate as a professional. Now these can be harsh words and they don't seem to be applicable to everybody. But I think it is true. I think it is applicable. That's putting up an argument and solving it yourself, right?

Where does the architect sit? Why is the architectural discipline slipping away, losing its recognition and dignity? Perhaps we have forgotten what the function of architecture is. If we think it is about technology and construction, it becomes clear that we do not need architects, we have the engineers who are more expert than us. If it is about project management, budget and money, we hardly need architects, because the quantity surveyors are much better at it. This is why Kahn is reminding us about the “ground” of architecture.

“Where (then) does an architect sit?” Kahn asked. “He sits right there,” he said. In fact, it is more accurate to say one sits right here. The architect who conveys the beauty of space, which is a meaningful environment, is one who is alive to the present and able to see the world for what it is. The architect has to invent new environments to meet new challenges. This is simply from seeing how the environment we create can be for learning about the world and life. It should never be a copy, a prototype, or a formula. This is what the architect is about. The architect is not a collector of information, he is an inventor of and revealer of life.

The ethical function of inventing new environments is for our self-growth and self-discovery, not just to be new and avant-garde. An inventive environment allows for our self-discovery through stimulating our creative imagination, to challenge us to see the richness and multi-dimensionality of our lived experiences. These new programs thus have the aim of an almost “alchemical” experience that leads to the making of a life, the transformation of the user.

## **Drawing a plan is drawing life**

23. Now then, the society of rooms is plan. You can say it is the structure of the spaces in light. And you can relate it also to an assignment that I gave myself to draw, a picture that demonstrated light. Now if you assign yourself a theme like that, the first thing you do is to escape somewhere, because it is impossible to do this, you say. The white paper is the illustration. If I illustrate light, I have white paper, and that is light. What else can I do? I thought that was the only thing to do. But I realized I wasn't right at all. When I put a stroke on the paper, a couple of strokes in ink, I realized that the black was where the light was not. And then I really could make a drawing. I would only be discerning as to where I put the black, where the light is not, and this made the picture come out.

24. I have some drawings and some slides with me, which I'll show to you some other time, which indicate this very clearly. The drawing is by Cruikshank, you know, an English illustrator of great importance to everyone. He made a drawing of a man sitting by a fire with a swaying female sort of next to him. Through a doorway in the night was a horse. The walls were receiving the light from the fire. A fireplace, out of the picture, radiated light, which caught on the folds of the undulating female and on the man sitting on his chair; the horse behind did not receive the light, but just little sparks of it. Every pen was subservient to the sense that where the stroke was, the light was not. And the thing became absolutely luminous. Closer to the fire it was practically white paper, and then it shaded away. It was a beautiful illustration of the realizations of the expressor to find the means of making evident this fact.

Using the example of drawing light on white paper, Kahn reminds us how to draw a plan. Seeing the room for what it is, we realize the plan is a reflection of the life to take place, and not a construction drawing. We are drawing life. Architecture is not just the physical elements of walls, columns, ceiling and floor. It is the activity which is happening in the room and between these elements. This is the light which we are designing.

How does one draw life? Like drawing light, it is in the relationship between drawing the black on the paper to show the white of light. Similarly,

though the architect's craft does not extend to how a room is used, it is exactly the event that we should design for. We have to work with how the elements and structure of the space allow for such an event to happen to its fullest. We have to remember that architecture is not just about beautiful details and nice colours, it is about how it could be used to transform our lives. Architecture is about drawing light from the dark.

### **About light**

25. Now this came from the realizations I had about light and I said that all material in nature — it being, as I said before, the mountains and the streams and the air we — are made of light which has been spent. And all material is light which has become exhausted. And this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow. And the shadow belongs to light. So light is really the source of all being. And I said to myself, the existence will be to express in the ooze, which you might say was just completely infiltrated with joy. To be, from touch to sight to hearing that one becomes manifest and the experience of this has become ingrained. And the will, the desire, was somehow a solid front to make a sight possible.

For Kahn, to design is to design with light. On the literal and “worldly” level, it is in the contrast between shadow and light that our architecture comes to life. Light, with its shadows, gives our design its character. On the metaphoric level, to design with light is the joy that radiates from our work when we enjoy and care for what we are doing and are performing our best. The ethical function of architecture is about working on both these levels, which is from knowing ourselves, being at peace, and creating with our hearts and minds.

## **What is the significance of all this?**

26. Now, you say, where is the significance in all this? It is the movement from silence, which is somewhat the seat of the measurable, which is the will to express, moving toward the means to express, which is material made of light. And light comes to you because actually it is not divided. It is simply something that's become manifest and that which desires to be manifest together. And the movement from light to a desire to be, to express, which meet at a point which may be called your singularity. These are as many meeting as there are people, and there must, in a way, almost be as many meetings as there are leaves on a tree, because I believe that sense must be in a tree or in a microbe equally as much as it is in every living creature. And this meeting spells your singularity.

Kahn asks, "Now you say, where is the significance in all this?" Have we gone too far off the track from talking about architecture? Kahn thinks not. What is significant, for Kahn, is the "the movement from silence, which is somewhat the seat of the measurable, which is the will to express, moving toward the means to express, which is material made of light."

From "silence, the will to express," where the architect "know oneself," to be able to gather and express one's humanness which is the "meeting that spells the architects unique and creative expression (singularities)." Through the architect's skilful use of concepts, symbols, images and materials, one "moves" towards "the means to express," to bring to "appearance (light)" our architectural expression which is "material made of light."

For Kahn, architecture is about working with both our tangible physical needs and the intangible psychological needs. He believes that the design should come from the psychological to manipulate the physical, such that a room allows for a meeting of ourselves and making of lives. That is his way,

it is up to us to find ours. I believe Kahn's philosophy was about our ontological and existential relation to architecture, which precisely calls for philosophical reflection. I do not think Kahn believed his personalized words and its meanings were very important, what was important was for us to understand his message.

### **The architect as visionary**

27. So where's the scientist and where's the poet? The poet is one who goes from the seat of the unmeasurable and travels toward the measurable but keeps the force of the unmeasurable with him all the time, disdaining almost to write a word, which is the means. Art, the first word. And he goes toward the measurable but holds the unmeasurable and at the last moment he must write a word because, although he desires not to say anything, words propel his poetry. He has to succumb to the word after all. But he's traveled a great distance before he used any of the means. Just a smidgeon, if you will, you see. And it was enough. The scientist, who has the unmeasurable qualities, which after all are all he has as a man, holds his line, does not go away or travel with the unmeasurable because he's interested in knowing. He's interested in the laws of nature. He allows nature to come to him. Which means he has so many degrees, you know. And it comes to him. And he at that point must grab it because it's as long as he can stand the difficulty of holding back. And so he receives knowledge in full. And he works with this and you call that being objective. But Einstein traveled with the poet. He holds the unmeasurable because he's a fiddle player. And so he holds the unmeasurable for a long, long time. And he also reaches nature or light at the very, very doorstep, because he only needs a smidgeon of knowledge, because from that smidgeon he can reconstruct the universe, because he deals with order and not knowing.

28. No piece of knowing, you see, which is always fragmentary, is enough for a man who is truly a visionary like Einstein. And he would not accept knowledge unless it belonged to all knowledge. Therefore he can so easily write his beautiful formula of relativity. It was just the way in which he just simply gave you that which can lead you to a greater sense of awe of order which all knowledge is really answerable to. One does not consider knowledge as belonging to anything human. Knowledge belongs only to that which has to do with nature. It belongs to the universe, but doesn't it belong to eternity? And there's a big difference.



So who is the architect? Is he a scientist or a poet? The poet is one who has to deal with ideas, our feelings and psychology by working with words. Both the architect and the poet have to move from the realm of ideas to engage the world concretely to reveal the richness and value of the world. The scientist, on other hand, stays in the realm of ideas and concepts speculating about the world, building conceptual systems and being objective. The scientist remains in the conceptual realm. Einstein, however, is like a poet who sees the world for what it is and engages our lived existence with his theory of relativity. For Kahn, Einstein was a true visionary, for with what he knew he changed the world. The architect should be a visionary. One cannot only dwell in concepts. One has to know the world, by seeing it for what it is, and understanding how its forces work, after which one has to relate it to our lived experience to transform our lives.

### **Conversation with a brick**

29. When you're making something you must consult nature, like the conversation with the brick. And you can make the same conversation with concrete. And you can make the same conversation with paper, or with papier maché, or with plastic, or with marble, or any material that has its nature. And it's the beauty of what you create that you honor — the material for what it really is. And never say that you use it in a kind of subsidiary way which makes the material itself wonder when the next man will come who will honor its character, you see.

One might wonder if Kahn is just being clever by asking us to have a conversation with a brick. Is he trying to tell us something or is he just saying nothing? I believe he is reminding us that we need humility and respect for our materials. For we have to recognize that we are also interdependent on our materials to bring our architecture to life. Humility and respect come

from our openness to see the material for what it is, and to help it realizes its potential.

As Chogyam Trungpa explained: "Form, is that which is before we project our concepts onto it. It is the original state of 'what is here,' the colourful, vivid, impressive, dramatic, aesthetic qualities that exist in every situation."<sup>101</sup>

To reveal the richness of the materials and to bring our architecture to life, we have to open ourselves to all the possibilities of our materials. This could only happen if, with humility and respect, we go beyond our preconceptions to see the materials for what they are and what they could be, and not force them to be what they are not or just for what they used to be. Only then will the materials be able to add its "radiance" to our architecture, for the architect to deliver "quality" for the common well-being of the users.

### **Learning and sharing**

30. How much can be learned, and it's not how much you learn, but it is really how much you honor, you see, the position of learning in connection with what you're doing. Because you must really ... you must know to feed your intuitive (*sic*), but you must not trust the knowing as being something that may be imparted to someone else. You translate it into the work you do, and that is your best character because your singularity will make that which is unfamiliar if you will just trust it for what it is. It will be unfamiliar in your own way. And the various expensive arts will be, will bring forward, something which had you in it as a kind of offering to the art which you are in the middle of.

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<sup>101</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, 188.

Learning, for Kahn, is not how much we know, but how much we value what we learn in relation to what we do. Learning from what he said, is not about learning an interesting theory. It is about developing an attitude for practice. He adds that we must feel our intuition, but not trust that this knowing can be imparted to others.

We must realize that knowing our facticity of Being and being able to see and experience the world directly without preconceptions cannot be described to others. It is just "being here." In order to share our realization, we must express our Being in our work, to translate this knowing into our work. This is our best character, for the work will reveal the unfamiliar and its richness to others and us, only if we will just trust our intuition and see it for what it is.

### **Talking about architecture**

31. So, now turning, let's say — so far I think I haven't talked about architecture at all — we talk simply about, let's say, the plan, and what is a room, and a plan being a society of rooms. You can do the same thing when you're dealing see with plans, with city plans. There's no difference to a person who sees this in the light of its nature. What is the nature of what you are doing? Then, a plan as big as a whole city is no more complex than a house. Not at all. It's just realizing that it isn't a bag of tricks or something to do with a traffic system or things like that, because a traffic system and all the other operational systems of a city are merely operational problems. You can get people with different singularities to help you with this.

So far what Kahn had talked about is not directly about how we do architecture, but what architecture is about and the development of our attitude towards architecture. Kahn feels that this is more important than knowing how to plan and build. This is because once we understand the

ground on which architecture stands and its relation to the way we make things, then planning a whole city is no more complex than a house. It is a matter of applying our understanding. The difficult part is to understand the "essence" of the problem. With an understanding of the problem, building the solution is only a coordination of the different people involved.

### **The life of the city is in its movement**

32. The great symphony of all forces which make a city, I think, belongs to the mind of the architect. He is the best trained to bring it all into some symphonic character. And that has nothing to do with making a kind of beautiful-looking plan. Not at all. It must be very true to its nature. So when you're dealing with a traffic problems, and you forget the helicopters, you forget the planes, you forget the parking, you forget all these things, you're only dealing with little things. Now the force of a road is one whose objective is to come somewhere. And this coming somewhere must be considered an event which serves you very well. If at that point you spend hours trying to find a parking space you have no plan. So you consider the movement as being rewarded, you consider the tall building on the street must surrender the six stories on the street for the street's purpose, and you have an elevator reach the sixth story, which exactly is what the person living in the tall building wants. He doesn't want to live on the first level. And you just consider everything as though it had its nature.

33. Most of all we mustn't forget that in a city the street must be supreme. It is actually the first institution of the city. It is a decision out of commonality that you choose a place out of all places to build a place where others can settle. It's a very important decision. It's of the same importance as the positioning of the Greek temple in Greek days amongst the hills. Of all the hills, this hill is chosen for the temple. And then all the other hills sort of beckon to it as though bowing to this decision, because you do not see the hills. No, you see them as only respecting the decision of the placing of this eulogizing kind of building which, you might say, is remarkable in that it has never been there before.

The planning of a city has nothing to do with a beautiful-looking plan. It has everything to do with understanding how a city works and seeing the city

for what it is and not what one thinks it should be. To see the city for what it is, we come to realize that the city is its movements and activities. Engaging with all that make up a city, we have to plan according to the needs of each activity, by looking clearly and understanding what each activity and the experience of it is about. This is seeing with no preconception. The strategy of planning a city, for Kahn, comes from considering the goal of each activity, from "being in the shoe of the activity," and telling its story, not what we think the activity should be. In developing the plan this way, the city will have a narrative of its movements, the placing of buildings will be obvious, and everyone will be glad it happened, because their needs have been considered.

## **Beginnings**

34. I honor beginnings. Of all things, I honor beginnings. I believe that what was has always been, and what is has always been, and what will be has always been. I don't think the circumstantial play from year to year and era to era means anything, but what has become available to you from time to time as expressive instinct does. The man of old had the same brilliance of mind as we assume we have only now. And that which made a thing become manifest for the first time is our great, great moment of creative happening. I have books in my place. I like English history. I like the bloodiness of it somehow — you know it's horribly bloody — but out of it came some thing. It's really just a miscuing of how things are made, and if you were to write a history of fear, I think you would write the most true of history books. And I have one of eight volumes, and I only read the first volume and only the first chapter, because every time I read it I also read something else into it. And the reason is that I'm really interested in reading Volume Zero. And maybe, when I get through with that, Volume Minus-One. History was much, much preceded. It just isn't recorded.

Kahn reminds us about our beginnings, which is our humanness, that has always been here. This humanness is the facticity of Being and its

actualization, it is the very expression of life. The circumstantial play from year to year and era to era are different manifestations of life. He wants us to remember that the essence of life is its creativeness. That is why we should strive towards creating new things. When a new thing is created, it is a great moment, because in our creativity, we are expressing life itself and revealing its potential and wonder. For Kahn, he strives to read not only Volume Zero but Volume Zero Minus-One, where perhaps the architect might reach the point of ultimate clarity in expressing one's creativity, in the most direct and unmediated way.

35. And that is the beauty of our work in that it deals with the recesses of the mind from which what is not yet said and what is not yet made comes. And I think it's important to everybody, because desire is infinitely more important than need. And it's disgraceful not to be able to supply the needs. It mustn't be considered an achievement if the country gives us our needs. It must be something that is a foregone conclusion if you're brought upon this world. But desire, to stymie that, to stymie the qualities of the not-yet-said and the not-yet-made, desire is the very reason for living. It is the core of the expressive instinct that has to be given play.

The beauty of our work lies in our confidence and openness that allow us reveal and share our new visions and perspectives of the world. The desire, that Kahn mentions, which is more important than need, is not about attachment or craving for something. This desire is the actuality of the dynamic process of life and its creative potentials, to bring-forth the "qualities of the not-yet-said and the not-yet-made," in the expression of our Being.

The responsibility of making architecture lies in being aware of the consequences of our actions. Perhaps we could see our actions in terms of aggressive and non-aggressive architecture. Aggressive architecture comes where it does violence to our humanness, when it is about exhibitionism or

melancholy, or for the sake of entertainment. All these do not actualize the humanness of the architect. They come from feeding our neurosis, paranoia and ego. Such architecture is aggressive because it is about "going to sleep," closing our eyes to the world and escaping from what it is. This is cowardly and is based on the psychology of fear. On the other hand, non-aggressive architecture is about being human, and basic goodness. It encourages the passion and heightened interest in the intriguing quality of things, and an inquisitiveness with a sense of wanting to explore every corner and discover every possibility of a situation. We begin to like the world and are interested in things.<sup>102</sup>

Non-aggressive architecture is therefore a very direct and brave engaging of the world-as-is. This is done with dignity, respect and care shown in the work. The intention is in the illumination of our human condition. All these come from a tremendous generosity and compassion towards the world and self. It is "a basic goodness that combines a quality of heaven, earth and man which are all involved at once."<sup>103</sup>

For Kahn, architecture is not just about meeting our physical needs, it is to help our human spirit to soar in its creativity, wherein will lie the joy and happiness of being alive.

### **Availabilities**

36. In cities, probably the measure of a city is the degree or the quality of the availabilities. We are living in a country which is the richest of all availabilities, if we were to speak up.

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<sup>102</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Dharma Art*, 15-16.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

And I'm glad we don't, because as soon as we become conscious of it, it'll be just as ruinous as McCarthy, who spoiled our true consciousness, our sense of democracy. He tried to define it and called for sides to be held, to be counted, and therefore destroyed the beauty of what democracy could be. And we're suffering to this day because of the attempt to isolate, you know, the qualities of democracy. I believe that the availabilities are really in this country. And we don't really appreciate them because they are there to be had. We want more of it because it's very nature of us. It's possible to avail yourself of something. And so availability is the hallmark of America. And it's been bandied around, it's been kept from certain people, but I think it's just there. You're about to assert yourself, and you find that it also comes your way. And I think that in the city, if I were to say, if I were to make a city plan, I think I would say, "In what way can I make the architecture of connection which would enliven the mind as to how the availabilities can be even more enriched than they are?" Put them into focus. They lost their character in the course of the operations because the original inspirations are gone. Other people take over and you do not sense, you see, those inspirational moments which make those intuitions possible. And there are many still that are, in the air, completely possible.

By "availabilities," Kahn means "places where the inspiration to meet expresses themselves as availabilities,"<sup>104</sup> which he also call "institutions" for the well-being of man and an inspiration to live.<sup>105</sup> They are places like the art museums, libraries, schools and civic buildings. It is important to note that Kahn's "institutions" have dynamic and changing programs, and should not be mistaken to mean established types of buildings. The measure of a city is the quality of these inspirations of life. The ethical function of architecture is in asking how architecture could enliven our minds by enriching these places of inspirations. For Kahn, the answer lies in the architect. The architect has the responsibility of putting the ethical intention into focus to ensure that these intentions are not lost when others take over. This necessitates skilful means.

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<sup>104</sup> Louis I. Kahn, "Architecture," *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, 280.

<sup>105</sup> Louis I. Kahn, "Remarks," *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, 198.



## **Skilful means**

37. The architect's job, in my opinion, and I must close on this, is to find those spaces, those areas of study, where the availabilities, not yet here, and those that are already here, can have better environments for their maturing into those which talk and say things to you and really make evident that the spaces that you make are the seat of a certain offering of man to next man. It is not an operational thing. You can leave that to the builders and to the operators. They already build eighty-five percent of the architecture, so give them another five percent if they're so stingy, so very selfish about it, and take only ten percent or five percent and be really an architect and not just a professional. A professional will bury you. You'll become so comfortable. You'll become so praised, equally to someone else, that you'll never recognize yourself after awhile. You get yourself a good business character, you can really play golf all day and get your buildings built anyway. But what the devil is that? What joy is there if joy is buried? I think joy is the key word in our work. It must be felt. If you don't feel joy in what you're doing, then you're not really operating. And there are miserable moments which you've got to live through. But really, joy will prevail. And thank you very much.

The architect's job is not just constructing the building, it is in creative imagination and discovering the "not yet here," that would realize better environments for the inspiration and well-being of humanity. Kahn reminds us that being an architect is not about getting as many jobs as possible or "playing golf, and getting your building built anyway." This is because very soon we will lose our focus and concentrate on business and playing golf, forgetting that architecture is the issue. Making architecture then becomes a chore and there will be no joy. For Kahn, the key to architecture is joy. It is only in joy that our work will be excellent.

Kahn is right. However, the reality of our contemporary world does not always allow for jobs to go to the ethical and creative<sup>106</sup> architect. This is because the creative architect often thinks that if one is good, jobs would come to him or her. Most of the time, however, the creative architects are wrong and are left behind, while the business architects get the job through marketing and developing personal contacts. Should the creative architect respond to the challenge of the situation? After all, if the ethical function of architecture is for a common happiness, perhaps ethical action should be about having more of architecture built for our well-being.

According to Chogyam Trungpa, "When a person is both wise and compassionate, his actions are very skilful and radiate enormous energy. This skilful action is referred to as 'skilful means,' *upaya*. Here 'skilful means' does not mean devious or diplomatic. *Upaya* just happens in respond to a situation. If a person is totally open, his response to life will be very direct, perhaps even outrageous from a conventional point of view, because skilful means do not allow for any nonsense. It reveals and deals with a situation as they are: it is extremely skilful and precise energy."<sup>107</sup>

With skilful means, perhaps the architect could work between the realm of the ideal and the realm of reality. As an example, we could learn from the experiences of architect Daniel Libeskind, the designer of the Jewish Museum

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<sup>106</sup> The use of the term "creative" refers to an architect who is aware of creative imagination and its ethical implications. This is in contrast to the general use of "creative" which means being original, which sometimes is just for the sake of being different and novel, without the ethical awareness. Thus, I am aware of the fact that not all creative architects have ethical intentions, some are also on their own ego trips, and not all commercial architects are not ethically aware. The point lies in the development of an ethical awareness. The ethical awareness is that one is aware of the consequence of our actions towards our common well-being.

<sup>107</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 210.

in Berlin, who is perhaps one of the most creative architect today. Libeskind said: "It is difficult to see the human, ethical perspective in various projects and involvements as an architect ... I have several projects which I am pursuing in which I struggle to keep on course between the political, social and architectural extremes and to produce something which has significance for the people."<sup>108</sup> He continued, "I do not have to tell you that the easiest part of a project is to win a competition – to make drawings, to make models, to think, to meditate, to invent new possibilities. The most difficult task, as I think I learned from my wife and partner Nina, is to struggle to go the next step – to implement such plans, to get them built, and to get public support for such a project."<sup>109</sup>

In another example, Libeskind's design was not selected for an urban planning competition, he shares his experience: "When the competition result was announced, I gave up, thinking that there is no way to convince the town that they had made the wrong decision ... (then) I learned that one should never give up. Instead one should try to meet people on another level. We presented the project to people who were not part of the government, just normal people ... They begin to see ... "<sup>110</sup> He succeeded in reversing the competition decision and winning the chance to implement his vision. These perhaps are examples of skilful means.

One might challenge Libeskind's view that his solution was the right one. However, I believe that if one believes what one is doing is not just for

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<sup>108</sup> Daniel Libeskind, *Daniel Libeskind, 1995 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture: Traces of the Unborn* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1995), 11.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

oneself but for the common growth and happiness of all, then one should have the conviction to fight for and to achieve it with skilful means. At the same time, we should be very careful that our ethical intentions does not become dogmatic and self-serving. This is why the development of the attitude for self-knowing and self-awareness is very important for the architect who must be constantly aware of our preconceptions.

For me, skilful means are necessary, for it is only by our ethical actions are we able to recover the joy and dignity of architecture, and eventually our humanity. Kahn ended his lecture with, "There are miserable moments which you've got to live through. But really joy will prevail."

## CONCLUSION

A lot has been said of Kahn. Many have venerated him while others have dismissed him as being a pseudo-mystic. Both sides miss the point. To venerate and imitate him is to copy him in form without having an understanding, while to dismiss him is only to see the form without trying to understand. Kahn has no methodology or any ideology to sell, nor has he a school of thought or a philosophy to teach. By sharing his reflections through a personal language, his intention was to awaken us to the importance of our attitude towards making architecture and the consequences of our actions. He believed that with the ethical "view" in place, the method is up to our individual imagination and means.

Perhaps one thing that both his critics and supporters could agree on about Kahn is the eclectic nature of his philosophy. It is also probably because of Kahn's eclectic sources that he has been dismissed as having a lack of focus and originality. His focus was to illuminate the relationship between architecture and our human condition, a human commonality which is beyond the limitation of a limited methodology or philosophy. His eclecticism, I believe, is a result of his attempt to answer our human questions outside a narrow categorizing tendency of differentiating this and that, Eastern and Western philosophy. That we could learn to see them together as a rich gathering of knowledge and insights which with our critical and non-judgemental sieving will help us illuminate our common human questions. As Buddha once said, there are as many paths towards enlightenment as there are many different teachings in Buddhism. The

important thing is to find the path that suits one's temperament and nature to reach the common goal.

Though Kahn did not intend the Buddhist slant in his philosophy, he did intend that we address the issue of our human condition in our art and architecture. I believe that architecture is essentially about our embodied experiences, and never about intellectual exercises of theory or philosophy. Ethical practice lies in the attitude of openness in the architect to see things as they are. That one is able to appreciate the richness of the world-as-it-is and not to be clouded by our egos, concepts and theories. To fearlessly act, with care, love, joy, respect, generosity and dignity, to reveal the joy and wonder of being human, dwelling in the present, working with the past, for the fulfilment of the future. This juxtaposition of Buddhist thought with Kahn's reflections hopefully highlights the possible contributions Buddhist philosophy might offer to contemporary architectural discourse, especially as it looks towards philosophy in an attempt to recover the ground of architecture.

Architecture is a work done and an offering to the world. It is for the world to treat it with respect and openness. There will be better designed buildings and there will be not so well designed ones. For each there will be something offered, but we must constantly strive for the better. Perhaps the one criteria for distinguishing among them should be the extent to which they address our perennial human questions and open up possibilities for existential orientation.

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