And then the exhibition turned to the future, where another fantasy unfolded, one also based more in rhetoric and image than in urban analysis and research. In the “Visions” section, “seven architects hailing from five different continents have designed the space of the service stations of the coming decades and tell how the cities will be influenced by the new energy devices.” The brief here clearly set its own limitations; it was about new forms for a changing energy landscape, but it was not ready to examine from an ecological or urban point of view the implications of the end of the petroleum age. The projects displayed picked up on compelling formal images and from them built elaborate visions of the landscape of the future, sometimes utopian, sometimes dystopian. The Tasmanian firm Terroir’s “Energy Forest” is a beautiful sectional models of a different kind of freeway, or Modus Architects’ “Heads up Highway” are both, in the end, highways, a fact that assumes individuals will continue driving fast from place to place, stopping to fill up with some kind of fuel at “service stations” of the future. Sou Fujimoto Architects’ “Energy Forest” is a beautiful sculpture but has little to do with energy harvesting and much to do with the icons of the age of green, trees without roots, wind turbines without foundations surrounded by a comic book sky of flying machines.

Lifethings of Seoul, Korea, proposed a thoughtful discourse on, and solution for, food energy and transportation, namely, a building that would reduce food miles by bringing food production closer to the city in theory and rationing people’s access to energy, as governments do with other dangerous substances such as pharmaceuticals. But the building that demonstrated this, replacing the existing gas stations of the old economy, looked a lot like the adolescent fantasies of the future seen in the historical section of the exhibition. Only now the future is “green,” literally, with shrubs on roofs and fish in ponds next to parking lots. Strangely absent was any reference to architects such as Paolo Soleri or Buckminster Fuller who posed alternatives to our fossil-fuel growth model long before it was fashionable.

Sandwiched between the science fiction visions of the future from the past, and the future as envisioned from the present, Energy presented a compelling selection of photographs, the “frames” that represent our current energy economy. In this small exhibition curated by Francesca Fabiani, three photographers examined present-day energy production, distribution, and consumption. Their images conveyed a gripping realism from which the sugar-coated architectural fantasies sought to escape. There we realized that the fantasies inspired by cheap fossil fuel and those inspired by the prospects of clean renewable energy are not all that different.

Finally, one cannot visit an exhibition at the MAXXI Museum dedicated to energy without noting that few buildings of the early twenty-first century have so totally ignored energy performance as Zaha Hadid’s Roman project.

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Related Publication

Notes

Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture
Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam
6 September 2012–6 January 2013
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany
23 February–11 August 2013
National Museum, Oslo, Norway
18 October 2013–26 January 2014

Since the end of the 1960s, Louis Isadore Kahn’s reputation as one of the most important architects of the twentieth century has grown. Kahn’s concrete-and-brick buildings, with their enigmatically monumental appearance, can be experienced only through costly trips to the United States, South Asia, and Israel. The Kahn retrospective (in Weil am Rhein at the time of writing and exhibited previously in Rotterdam) was only the second opportunity since an exhibition at the ETH in Zurich in 1969 for those on the European continent to take a look at his work.

Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture, organized by the Vitra Design Museum, the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam, showed a new generation of the European architectural community the work of the architect in an exhibition that was enormously rich in material. The concept of the exhibition was developed by the Swiss architectural theorist Stanislaus von Moos and the Vitra curator Jochen Eisenbrand. They aimed for a picture of Kahn in the context of the latest scholarly research, concentrating on Kahn’s biography and his discerning, philosophically inspired understanding of nature. The exhibition was conceptualized as a thematically structured multimedia show.

Frank Gehry’s Vitra Design Museum (1989), a sculptural conglomerate of nested geometric bodies that at times tilt into one another, would seem at first fully opposed to the archaic strength of Kahn’s architectural language. Inside the exhibition rooms, the strain between Gehry’s deconstructive staging and Kahn’s almost always right-angled forms nonetheless largely resolved itself. They impinged upon each other occasionally, as when in the upper story Gehry’s asymmetrically angled skylights met the iconic monumentality of Kahn’s parliament and administrative buildings for Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Ahmedabad, India.

The exhibition summarized Kahn’s work under seven main headings, the first focusing on biography, followed by the thematic categories of city, science, landscape, house, eternal presence, and community. These categories link Kahn’s buildings to a notion of universal concepts. The curators thereby put Kahn’s philosophically inspired self-image, formulated in 1961 in
his famous essay “Form and Design,” in a direct—and also affirmative—relationship to his buildings. The claim to give pre-existing form an architectural shape, analogous to the Platonic concept of the Idea, formed the philosophical basis of Kahn’s postutilitarian, modern architecture.

In the large biographical section opening the exhibition, a plenitude of material and media, including clips from Nathaniel Kahn’s film *My Architect* (2003), makes the chapters of Kahn’s life comprehensible. The chronologically organized mass of material—the walls of the ground-floor exhibition area impart almost a *horror vacui*—delivers an excellent view of Kahn’s environment and his creative development. That the artistically talented young man supported his family for eight years while they were living in the slums of Philadelphia by playing piano accompaniments to silent films, in the era of the early masterworks of Charlie Chaplin and D. W. Griffith, was explained in as much detail through sketches and documents as it was through Kahn’s study tours of Europe and his influential teaching at Yale and the University of Pennsylvania.

Throughout, the exhibition presented Kahn’s artistic oeuvre as being as significant as the architectural work and showed Kahn’s drawings with their half-abstract forms as a reflective medium in direct juxtaposition with his models. Thus a watercolor of the medieval towers of San Gimignano is displayed alongside the Richards Medical Research Center (1957–65), erected about thirty years later in Philadelphia. Kahn’s strikingly analogous formation of the looming tower-like ventilation and stair shafts and of the urbanistically articulated complex of the laboratory buildings exemplifies his orientation toward historical types, unthinkable for functional modernism (Figure 1).

After the biographical exhibition came Kahn’s urban planning for Philadelphia, under the heading “City.” The young Kahn had designed radical urban planning on Le Corbusier’s model in the 1930s during the Great Depression; in 1939 he even formulated a “Voisin Plan” that envisioned the demolition of Philadelphia. Between 1949 and 1970, Kahn developed concrete plans for the urban renewal of Philadelphia that were never realized. A concept study, applied to the wall, showing huge, cylindrical parking towers grouped around Philadelphia’s Center City, an experimental film, and diagrams of traffic flowing through colossal viaducts conveyed the inventive laboratory atmosphere out of which Kahn’s urban designs arose.

The model of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park, which opened posthumously in New York in 2012, showed Kahn’s use of geometrical forms for the plan. In 2010 Michael J. Lewis conclusively traced the formal language of the Roosevelt memorial back to a 1932 competition design—concealed during Kahn’s lifetime—for a Lenin Memorial.1 Kahn reached back for the memorial, a circular island penetrated by a wedge-shaped bridge flanked by a pair of enormous skyscrapers glazed in red, to the abstract codes of El Lissitzky’s revolutionary image, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919).

The next section of the exhibition showed models of realized buildings under the heading “Science.” Setting the tone here was the 4-meter-high model of the unrealized City Hall Tower of 1952–57 that Kahn designed together with Ann Tyng. The tower, with its open, spiraling renewal of Philadelphia that were never realized. A concept study, applied to the wall, showing huge, cylindrical parking towers grouped around Philadelphia’s Center City, an experimental film, and diagrams of traffic flowing through colossal viaducts conveyed the inventive laboratory atmosphere out of which Kahn’s urban designs arose.

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space frame structure, stood for Kahn's "structuralistic" approach. The City Hall Tower can be counted as a direct predecessor of the Japanese Metabolist Kisho Kurokawa's Helix City Project. The influence of Kahn on the Japanese Metabolists, which motivated the choice of Arata Isozaki as designer of the 1991 Kahn retrospective in Los Angeles, was mentioned in the catalogue but not illustrated in the exhibition.

The spectacular geometrical structures on display from the workshop of Kahn's colleague Robert Le Ricolais somewhat overshadowed Kahn's hollow columns of the same time. Kahn developed them out of the Palladian separation of served and servant spaces. Hollow columns like the ventilation towers of the Richards Medical Center bundled the services together and kept them away from the served spaces.

That Kahn's buildings were also controversial was not discussed in the exhibition. The Richards Medical Center was sharply attacked by Nikolaus Pevsner in his *European Architecture*. Pevsner suspected that Kahn had orchestrated the "hard and closely packed towers … as a welcome vision" without functional legitimacy. Pevsner's criticism also explains the outsider position that Kahn held in relation to the mainstream of classical modernism as represented by Pevsner.

Kahn's domestic and landscape commissions were grouped under the headings "House" and "Landscape" in the last exhibition room on the ground floor. The material quality of these buildings, so difficult to address in an exhibition, is impressively visible in the catalogue in Thomas Florschuetz's photographs. They show with extreme clarity of detail the deliberate rawness of the wall surfaces of the Salk Institute and of the Parliament Building in Bangladesh.

The wealth of exhibits on the ground floor gave way in the upper story to a more generously spaced presentation. Kahn's institutional buildings in India and Bangladesh, the project for the Monument to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs (1966–72), and also his realized and projected sacred buildings were exhibited under the headings "Eternal Presence" and "Community." Here was displayed Kahn's rediscovery within modernism of the formal vocabulary of antiquity—mediated through Piranesi, whose plan of the Roman Campo Marzio of 1762 hung in Kahn's office. The concentrically laid-out plan of the governmental complex in Dhaka (1962–83) and the business school campus in Ahmedabad (1962–74), with their exterior walls perforated by geometrical circles and triangles, represent Kahn's ideal architecture for democratic institutions. In his key text "Monumentality" (1944), Kahn positioned democratic institutions as the highest-ranking building type. Nathaniel Kahn's documentary film about Dhaka, made especially for the exhibition, was also on view. The noisy daily life that unfolds in the parliament building is evident in the film, and it appears as if Kahn's ideal of a peaceful, democratic utopia has been realized in the present.

Along with a list of works, the opulent catalogue collects essays by such renowned Kahn scholars as Kenneth Frampton and examples of new research, such as Florian Sauter's essay on Kahn's philosophically tinged understanding of nature.

With its wealth of objects, the exhibition offered an excellent insight into Kahn's work. However, the universal concepts used for the organizing themes, such as "House" and "City," conform perhaps too easily to Kahn's own formal claims for his projects. This allows the coherence of Kahn's work and ideas to seem at times overbearing. The same goes for the history of his reception, which is intimated only in the very affirmative tone of the filmed interviews with architects. A somewhat less filtered picture would certainly have added a relevant contextual dimension to Kahn's significance, strengthening it in the process.

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Related Publication

Notes